

Liminal Spaces in Negotiation Process: A Case Study of the Process of Crossing Relational and Interpretive Thresholds

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...narrative schemes may provide a science of the imagination (Bruner, 1986, p. 141).

Introduction

This story¹ unfolds on the day that I received a phone call from Dora requesting intervention in a conflict in her sibling group---one of her (5) brothers,² Ernesto, wanted to leave the family business and take his portion of the assets with him. However, it seemed, according to Dora, that this was not possible because the sibling set, as a group, did not know the value of their assets. They *did* know that their assets, left to them by their father when he died,³ constituted 1/3 of the total assets of the larger holding company, held originally by their (now deceased) father, their uncle and their aunt. After the father died, the uncle, the (dreaded) uncle, ran the entire business, and did not pass information to others about the nature or the value of the holdings. So there was simply not information available to the sibling set necessary to “buy out” the interests of Ernesto. As a result, he continued to be angry and engage in “vengeful and destructive” behavior.

Meanwhile Dora (Vice Presidente) and Henrique (Presidente) both had administrative responsibilities for the 1/3 portion of the whole they supposedly controlled. Yet without information, they were able to do little more than pass on the monthly checks to their siblings that came from the dividends from their 1/3 portion.⁴ Imprisoned in the Uncle’s holding company, the siblings were unable to help Ernesto leave, AND extremely angry/concerned about Ernesto’s “acting out” behavior, which threatened the status and reputation of the sibling set, re the larger network of relatives.

I framed Ernesto as “gutsy” and willing to be the one that “rocked the boat”; Dora agreed, and said that he was the only one of the six that could confront the uncle. I asked what Ernesto did to rock the boat and Dora explained that he had taken a job at the only bank that the family did not own, in their Latin American city, effectively supporting “competitors.” Prior to that, he had quit a job within the “larger holding” that the Uncle had given him, protesting that it was

¹ While the language of transference and counter transference is not my vocabulary, I resonated with Hoffman’s (2001) disclosure that he makes in *Ritual and Spontaneity in the Psychoanalytic Process*, within a section entitled, “Writing the paper: ‘The Patient as therapist to his analyst’” (p.267). Like Hoffman, I have been, as I began to write this paper, acutely aware of the people about whom I am writing. Hoffman notes that this is itself a liminal space. Needless to say, all the names (with the exception of “Pinochet”) are changed, and I have taken out all specific identifying features of their situation and altered the circumstances so they cannot be identified from this paper.

² Siblings from oldest to youngest are: Henrique (42), Carlos (40), Dora, (37), Ernesto, (35), Nico (33), and Manuel (30).

³ He had been dead for approximately 12 years. During that time, Henrique had managed the portion of the holding company inherited from their father. The mother had been dead for three years, yet they kept her apartment, and indeed, this consultation was held in her apartment where the youngest (Manuel) still lived.

⁴ For clarity I will refer to the 1/3 portion as the “small holding” which was a subset of the “large holding” controlled by the (dastardly) uncle.

impossible to work effectively in the environment of fear/control that the uncle fostered. And finally, Dora explained that not only had Ernesto joined the political party in opposition to the one the Uncle supported, but also that Ernesto was “irresponsible” with money and unable to get out of debt. He was heavily in debt to his siblings, and demanded not only to continue getting his monthly check, but also to live in the apartment owned by the small holding, rent-free. Not only was Ernesto a “pain” for the siblings, but also he posed a continual threat to the siblings’ relationship to the uncle. This was a serious problem, as the Uncle could, if he so chose, position any of these siblings in lucrative and powerful positions in the business, or confer large sums of money (I called them “besos” or “kisses”) whenever he was inclined. Thus Dora was extremely worried that this “crazy” brother in their midst would “poison the well” for herself and all of her siblings.

I was hooked. This story had all the makings of a serious melodrama, if there is such a thing--it was both a caricature of a wealthy Latin family, and as well as a very real and painful story of suffering and fear, of oppression and violence. The archetype of the patriarch intersected the archetype of the beautiful (unemployed) and newly married daughter; the archetype of the rebel resonated with its opposite--- the dutiful, long-suffering son. The archetype of the overweight youngest son, who never had worked, was in total contrast to the archetype of the entrepreneurial son, who had already quietly invested in a partnership that was growing, despite the death of his young wife, ravaged by cancer. I felt like I had fallen into a novel, and these characters were writing me, writing themselves, and writing a future they could clearly see, but did not choose and did not want. I agreed to go to their home base, in Latin America, to meet with all of the siblings over the course of four days; during this time, I insisted that we explore the broader set of problems/conflicts that swirled in this sibling set, as they related to each other and to their business. So this consultation was framed as both a problem solving *and* a strategic planning session. Further, I signaled, overtly, my interest in their narratives, and forecast their examination and interrogation. It was not a “mediation” but rather an exercise in narrative facilitation on my part, to open the space for participants to negotiate with each other. And though I was not myself a party to the negotiation, in a formal sense, I was indeed party to the set of relationships that emerged.

I went and did this work. I fell in love with all of these people. And together, we made it possible for a new future to emerge, one that brought long-term second-order change to both the individuals (myself included), as well as to the system. I write this paper as a way to account for these changes, as a way to build, from this case, a theoretical frame for tracking not only the evolution of meaning, (*that* it occurred), but a theory for tracking *how* it occurred. I am seeking to not only describe the process of the negotiation as a meaning making process, attending to tipping points where the core meanings shifted, but also to account for elements of these shifts that were central to their production and the evolution of identity. As Beech (2011) has noted, identity is socially constructed and reconstructed in conversations, in “living moments” (Helin, 2011) where people move from existing into new identities. And it is these living conversations where the liminal space makes these transformations possible.

From that perspective, this paper is an ethnography of these tipping points into new identities towards an effort to formulate a pragmatics of these shifts in meaning within negotiation processes. More specifically, as these moments occur in the contexts of a relationship, they alter the relationship, as well as the space in which that relationship resides, the relational container, the “between space” where personal identities are inextricably intertwined and overlapping. In the case of a family business negotiation, personal identities are not only

intertwined in the set of family relationships, but they are also overlapping the business relationships (Poza, 2010)---brothers don't pay rent to siblings, cousins gossip across organizations (in the larger holding) leaking information which reduces the competitive edge for one business, mothers appoint sons to positions of power, indifferent to skills or experience, uncles hide crucial financial information from the rest of the family business members, ner-do-well sons build up debts that the family business pays off, etc., etc., etc. In the case of family business conflicts it is precisely in these interstitial spaces, in the spaces between people where the logic of business intersects, if not collides, with the logic of family.

This is an ethnography of "how" evolution occurs in negotiation process; it is my attempt to describe both the management of relational *thresholds*, (between-spaces) as well as the thresholds where new meaning, new ways of sense making begin to materialize but are not yet realized. These "between" spaces, of relationships, of meaning, are referred to by Turner (1982) as "liminal"⁵---"zone(s) of indeterminacy,"⁶ spaces on the margin of meaning.

And it is these spaces, Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) argue, that both contribute to the process of organizational transformation and to the consulting process itself---the nature of the consultation is critical to the emergence of liminal spaces. As the change agent in this case study, as well as the ethnographer of this case study, I draw on Turner's concept of "liminality" to

⁵ The word was first used by van Gennep (1960) in *Rites of Passage*; he argued that passage had three stages and each stage had its own set of rites: (1) separation rites, in which initiates were separated from everyday life, excluded from social activities; (2) liminal rites, in which social hierarchy was inverted/reversed; and (3) aggregation rites in which community was reaffirmed and social relations were normalized. Victor Turner (1975) built on this work, elaborating the role of the liminal phase. He described ritual itself as a social drama that functioned to manage social conflict and/or social transitions that involved breach, crisis, and re-integration. The liminal phase was one in which the social order (hierarchy) itself became subject to inversions and reversals; as Bakhtin & Holquist (1982) have pointed out, this is often the case in carnival---enactments which play with social order function to both materialize and dramatize it, releasing its hold. Thus the liminal phase was not merely a phase *between* separation and aggregation, it is a phase, a place of transformation for those that engage in and witness the (playful) dramatic inversion of hierarchy and return to a different relation within that hierarchy. Thus identity transformation is not limited to the person who is the object of a rite of passage, but it also refers to those that pass through the liminal phase. "Communitas" emerges from the liminal process, as those that participate in the liminal phase share recognition *that* they or their representative were "stripped" of the signs and symbols of everyday life, making the threshold between normal and extraordinary appear.

Elsewhere, Turner (1977) discussed the difference between liminal processes, which are grounded in tribal communities, and "liminoid" processes, grounded in secular, industrial communities. In the former, the whole group was engaged in the ritual whereas in the latter, small group step outside the "mainstream not only of economic but also of domestic familial life" (p.47). Through these leisure activities, people express identity through their membership and participation in clubs and other social activities.

Throughout Turner's work, he argues that the liminal phase is the transformation space that "defies cognitive and volitional construction" (p.46). If this is the case, both relational and interpretative domain are implicated, for people make sense of life in the context of relationships. In other words, I am arguing that the evolution of meaning, of narrative, is essential to the transformation process, but that it is *not* a process where reason and agency rule; rather it seems a place where reflection is made possible through the materialization of the interpretative frames that hold relationships in place. If this is the case, the "liminal" is both the inversion within relationships, as well as reflection on meaning systems that hold those relationships in place.

Just to stir the pot, I am not convinced that the process of psychoanalysis moves past the phase of "separation" where the patient steps out of everyday life. While certainly the liminal can occur, and may even occur with frequency in the psychoanalytic process, I wonder whether or not the hierarchy of the patient/therapist relationship reduces the possibility of liminality; having never been in analysis, from the outside, it appears that while dreams and fantasy may be the object of the conversation, inversions/reversals would be less possible, given the "thick" medium of the client/patient relationship.

⁶ Palmer (1980) reprinted at <http://www.mac.edu/faculty/richard/liminality.html>.

argue that a) liminal spaces are implicated in tipping points within negotiation process; b) that the liminal spaces are produced through the ritual of witnessing suffering/pain; and c) that witnessing pain (in the way I shall define it) materializes what Turner called “*communitas*,” a marker of liminal processes; challenging the notion of “*communitas*” I argue that in liminal phases, the binary opposition between good and evil, victim and victimizer, dissolves, materializing the morality of both characters and narrators. This paper is my journey back through the work, to find the critical moments, to make sense of the thresholds we created and crossed. Life has not been the same, not only because we altered ways of understanding and we built relationships, but also I became sensitized to these liminal spaces. Thus this paper, I hope to be able to learn what I already know.⁷

Crossing Thresholds in Negotiation Process: Tracing Dark Matter”⁸

“Thresholds” have yet to be explored in the negotiation literature. In the paragraphs above, I distinguished two: relational thresholds, and thresholds in the interpretative meaning system. While there is not research on thresholds, there has been work on change processes in negotiation, involving focuses on changes in relationships/roles (Gergen, 2009; McGinn & Keros, 2002), changes in parties’ positions (Zartman & Touval, 2007), changes in perceptions (Fisher & Shapiro, 2006), changes in negotiation dynamics (Kolb & Williams, 2001), and changes in identity (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2000), and changes in frames (Putnam & Roloff,

⁷ From this perspective, the whole paper is what Palmer, citing Heidegger, a “step (ping) back” from what I think, to see what I know. Palmer also refers to Richardson’s (1979) paper on Heidegger and Lacan noting that “both Lacan and Heidegger root their thinking in a latency lying beneath the surface” (p.4). While the psychoanalytic tradition may equate “liminality” with the threshold between the conscious and the subconscious, I find this very problematic, as a definition for three reasons: (1) I think these liminal spaces are social spaces, not intrapsychic spaces in the heads of individuals; (2) the notion that there is a subconscious calls up a hierarchy (surface and deep structure) that is isomorphic to Turner’s notion of social hierarchy, where relations of (structural) dominance are the norm; liminality is the antidote, according to Turner; and (3) I think the process of doing psychoanalysis is (most likely) anchored in and through the enactment of liminal spaces, not as pre-conscious spaces in individuals, but as social spaces where the therapist/client hierarchy is both maintained *and* undermined, through this process of witnessing suffering, humanizing both therapist and client in the process. Hoffman (2001) also presumes that “liminal” refers to the spaces where the hierarchy begins to evaporate---in the corridor at the elevator, in the immediate moments after the close of the psychoanalytic session, before the patient leaves, in the beginning, before the session starts. Without being an expert in psychoanalysis,, I think that this is an extremely gendered way of defining “*communitas*” which is much more than the disappearance of hierarchy. I think it is the appearance of the humanity of the narrator, as well as the elaborator, as well as the characters that get elaborated. This, in turn, involves the creation of a moral narrative that materializes the goodness of people; it is also a story where narrators/interactants perch on the threshold of responsibility for problems, rather than externalizing blame. So I am not satisfied with Turner’s discussion of the relationship between *communitas* and liminality. If we consider Belenky (1986) where she discusses women’s ways of “connected knowing,” this way is clearly a process for connecting with others, that materializes all interactants (and actors) as legitimate, as moral. See D’Agostino’s (2001) excellent discussion of the relation between liminality and moral narratives.

⁸ See <http://www.mac.edu/faculty/richardpalmer/liminality.html> for a discussion of “dark matter”; this research problem in cosmology has intrigued me---they can see the universe does not add up, so they hypothesize the presence of matter they cannot witness, to mesh with the laws of physics. It turns out that dark matter is really present; it is simply less “luminous” than non-dark matter that we can see. I love this metaphor, as, for me, it is a whimsical analogy to the presence of “dark” stories in systems, that are there, that need to be witnessed. I also enjoy the play on the word “matter” as what matters to people. And I like the notion that we cannot understand the system absent these dark stories. But then the analogy breaks down---people, unlike galaxies, shift when dark matter is explored. In my limited knowledge, galaxies are not very reflexive.

1992). For the purposes of this paper, I would argue that the research on change in negotiation is most often tracking “change” as the difference between two states (state change) which is *not* the same as tracking a change as the process of crossing a threshold where one way of being/making sense tips into another. However, some of the negotiation literature indirectly addresses relational “thresholds”; for example, McGinn & Keros (2002) track the evolution of roles/scripts in negotiation, but do not theorize the spaces where the thresholds between these scripts are, nor the pragmatics of their tipping from one, into another. Similarly, frame analysis,⁹ like other forms of content analysis,¹⁰ enables attention to the nature of the frames and the differences between frames over time, but it does not enable the description of *how* frames tip¹¹ from one to another over time.¹² Again, in order to advance our theory of practice (praxis), we need to be able to not only note the changes in meaning systems, but to trace their origins, in the “dark matter” of conversational spaces where boundaries between people, and between interpretative frames, are maintained, and evolved through interaction.

Kolb and William’s (2001) analysis of the “shadow negotiation” begins to address that which lies below the “turns”¹³ in the negotiation process. They document the way that gender delimits the moves/turns that women have in negotiation process. They offer us a peek at the negotiation about the negotiation, as they track how double binds at the cultural level are manifest in negotiation process. They make recommendations as to how to strategically use moves and turns to position self/others so as to navigate the limits imposed by gendered roles. These moves by speakers function as turning points, to re-position speaker/other.¹⁴

The work of Stone et al. (2000) provides another example of negotiation research that offers a pragmatics for “dark matter” in negotiation process. They offer a framework for understanding the complexity of meaning in the negotiation process, as they describe the complex interaction between the story about *events*, layered over the story about the *feelings*, in turn, layered over the story of *identity*. Their theory is that the progressive attention to these layers in the conversation will enable new options to appear, as parties build more complexity into their view of self and other. The “dark matter” in this case is the layered stories about feelings and identity that are not addressed when parties focus on the “what happened” story. While they do not theorize the threshold between these layers, they do offer prescriptive advice as to how to get folks to move

⁹ See Schön (1994) *Frame Reflection*.

¹⁰ See Krippendorf’s (2004) *Content Analysis*.

¹¹ “Tipping” is an interesting word to apply to frame analysis, as it focuses not on the strategic quality of the movement, but instead implies some organic process within the discourse itself. This is very orthogonal to the traditional negotiation research which most of the time offers “prescriptive advice” as to how to make changes (state changes) in negotiation processes. I am here arguing for a non-agentic theory, more interested in how discourse functions organically to manage these thresholds for us.

¹² Putnam (2004) presented her research on teacher negotiations and focused on the critical moments in the negotiation where turning points occurred. She is doing a version of process mapping, coupled with frame analysis. This work will move closer to being able to address how frames shift over time.

¹³ Turn-taking theory itself has at its core, the notion of “reciprocal orientation” which provides the initial sketch of an analytic toward explaining how moves alter meaning. But because turn taking theory is focused on conversational structure, it is less revealing on process. See Sacks et al. (1974).

¹⁴ Although Kolb and Williams (2001) do not cite the literature on liminal spaces, threshold spaces, their research is very consistent with Turner’s (1982) analysis of liminality. Turner argues that liminal spaces strip away the signals/signs that mark social hierarchy; certainly gendered spaces are criss-crossed with the footprints of social hierarchy. Thus the “moves” that they advocate are essentially “liminal” in that they function to reduce that hierarchy. However, while Turner argues that dissolution of social space *produces* the condition of “communitas,” I can imagine that Kolb and Williams would be less than comfortable with the notion that they these moves dissolve gender (hierarchy).

into the “dark matter.” Again, while this work does help us look at the stages/states/layers, it does not theorize the spaces between those layers beyond the prescriptive advice as to how to explore them.¹⁵

Efforts to address the role of emotion in negotiation are clearly moving in the direction of explicating the dark matter (the shadow spaces) and provide a potentially important lens on negotiation pragmatics. While some of this research treats emotion as a “variable,”¹⁶ Fisher and Shapiro, (2006) explore the role of emotion in negotiation processes; this work provides a theoretical frame for the negotiation pragmatics, yet it does not explicitly examine the process of the transformation of meaning, nor does it theorize the threshold spaces where emotions tip from one to another.¹⁷

In my own research on narrative transformation in negotiation and mediation¹⁸ the concept of “legitimacy” functions as the “dark matter” that anchors my explanation of why people are elaborating narratives in particular directions; however, although my work does track changes in narratives, I have not examined the interstitial spaces where relationships/meaning tips. My analytic attention to the logic of *why* and *how* people position themselves in discourse does not attend to the threshold spaces between meaning, between people.

In summary, while negotiation research has theorized and documented change, I have argued in this paper that the notion of “change” has been more of a state change, than an evolutionary model. Furthermore, the research that has tracked the evolution of relationships or meaning, has not theorized discourse or narrative as containing “between” or “threshold” spaces that function both to mark a threshold between identities, relationships and meaning, as well as to provide a non-space where tipping becomes possible. In the case study to follow, I will explore the tipping points, the role of witnessing in these moments, and describe the work to find and stay within the between place where new meanings/identities/relationships shimmer on the horizon of the old.

The Case

There are three¹⁹ important tipping points that I want to explore in this study: (1) the group went from naming their father’s brother as “uncle” to calling him “Pinochet” and in the process, they went from blaming him for their troubles to framing themselves as responsible for navigating a complex and difficult system; (2) Dora went from defining her brother’s apartment as a “joint asset” to a defining it as his “home,” and in the process, she acknowledged that he was entitled to a private (sex) life, and that she needed to own the fact that it was she who moved away and no longer had a “home” but would be instead a guest in his home, should he invite her to stay with him, during her visits to Latin America; (3) the group went from seeing “random unfairness” in “Pinochet’s” distribution of money (both within the sibling group and across other segments of the extended family), to seeing him as giving out “kisses,” and in the process, decided that they had acted like “spoiled brats” and began to plan to re-invest and re-capitalize their holdings. In

¹⁵ One of my concerns with this work is that the movement from one level to another implies a different quality of the relationship between conversants (negotiators). Absent attention to this, they are essentially suggesting that folks cross relational boundaries without first having the quality of relationship necessary to do so.

¹⁶ See Allred (1999). He examines the connection between revenge/retaliation and negotiation outcomes.

¹⁷ It is interesting to note, however, that they used the phrase “emotional levers” when they started this research, indicating (indirectly) that they saw tipping occurring in negotiation processes.

¹⁸ See Cobb (2013, 2006, 2003) and Cobb and Rifkin (1991).

¹⁹ There were many other tipping points where liminal spaces appeared in the work, but I only have space/time to describe three.

four days, this group solved major relational problems, laid the foundation for a relation with “Pinochet” that became the envy of their extended family, and created a business plan that accompanied both saving, and the creation of new ventures. Years later, there are still problems that crop up, and they have called me to consult, upon occasion, but they have maintained the meaning and relational frames that we set in motion during those four days. All are thriving, and together their business has grown and changed. That the changes happened is not what interests me in this paper---it is more my intention to describe *how* (I think) they came about.

All of these episodes I will describe took place in the living room of their mother’s apartment; she was not in town during this work. The living room had a wonderful panorama of the city, lots of windows, with a sofa (where the President Brother and his Entrepreneurial Brother sat), a lazy boy recliner, (where the “fat” youngest “lazy” brother sat), another sofa (where Dora, and the Troublemaker sat) and the 6th brother was not there for any of this work. I sat in a dining room chair, in a corner of the room, facing all of them. We took our meals in the dining room, adjacent to the living room; we broke for snacks and bathroom breaks. I had dinner with each one of them, during my stay; dinners were at local restaurants. I went running each evening with the overweight youngest brother, much to the shock of his siblings. It was in this environment where the boundaries between “guest” and “consultant” shimmered that we did this work together. (Note: I will discuss the implications of these “tips” for a theory of the role of witnessing in the production of liminal space at the end of the description of the three episodes).

From “Uncle” to “Pinochet”

This group of siblings was, from the start, expressing a variety of negative feelings about their uncle who had:²⁰

- “Stolen all the money our father had left for us...”
- “Hidden all the information about the assets so no one could challenge him”
- “Bought expensive apartments and private jets”
- “Put all of *his* children in positions of power across the holdings”
- “Made indirect threats that he would cut us off”
- “Would not tolerate challenges to his authority”

For all of these story lines, I asked questions that elaborated the narratives in the direction they were telling me; they seemed relieved and aroused, as a group, by just being able to “let go” about all the bad things he had done. They described all his despicable activities with animation; at first I tried to offer suggestions (legal remedies etc), but for each suggestion, there was a reason why it would not work. During this conversation, we elaborated together the complex history, the particular affronts, the fears, the reasons why the fears were justified, and the potential dangers for the future, the consequences of confrontation. Their suffering was a rich developed tapestry of the plots, characters, and themes anchoring the negative description of their uncle, as well as their helplessness.

After a moment of silence, sitting in my chair, with their expectant gazes on me, I said that I felt helpless, that I thought that there was nothing that they nor I could do, and I started to compare their world to those who lived in the shadow of a repressive political regimes---free

²⁰ The quotes that follow are approximations of the stories they told me.

speech was nonexistent even though the regime framed itself as “open”; contestation could lead to being “targeted” by the regime. If you were targeted, you endangered those you were close to, for they would also become contaminated by proxy; the legal system was not a resource, but in fact supported the regime with a variety of (clandestine) police activities.

As I spoke, they fell quiet, their faces became blank, and a couple of mouths dropped open. I finally likened the uncle to Pinochet, with a giggle, as I was by that time, going a bit overboard with the analogy, and a bit uncomfortable that I had gone too far. They erupted in laughter²¹ and the language immediately switched from English to Spanish---they were using slang and swear words, expressing things that could only be said in Spanish. Ernesto jumped up and started marching around the room in a military fashion. Once the hilarity died down, I began to talk about the “rules of engagement” in oppressive regimes---what you can do, what you cannot do. They jumped in and helped elaborate those rules, and then I started making a list of them on the flip chart. When we were done with the list, it was clear to all that this was a complex system and that, while Pinochet was the ruler, there were many others who participated in the maintenance of the oppression. (Much later in the week, we would begin to talk about Pinochet being himself imprisoned in this system). By the end of this discussion, everyone was clear that they could complain all they wanted, but that it was not *justice* that was the issue, but survival. They then created a set of ground rules for interacting with Pinochet:

- No backchannel gossip with other extended family members about Pinochet
- Only the President Brother should approach Pinochet with business issues
- All of them should call and visit him for the purpose of expressing their appreciation to him, for specific things that he did that were helpful, kind or generous

I then asked them what they were doing, in their own holding that was similar to or different from Pinochet type business practices. Immediately there were a host of accusations to the President Brother from the others. I then asked him to tell us all about the worries and fears that he had, that contributed to the lack of transparency. He then talked about how afraid he was of his own siblings in this oppressive environment where information would be used against the business. Secrecy bred secrecy. There was then a discussion about the “rules of engagement” for transparent systems, and they again made a list of “dos” and “don’ts.” At the end of that discussion, they promised that they would keep the rules for transparency, acknowledging that it would only take one person, one time, to begin to erode transparency and bring back secrecy. I made them develop a secret handshake and there was more hilarity and again, a switch to Spanish.

From “Joint Asset” to “Home”

In the next phase of the work (after a lunch), Dora said that she wanted to bring up a conflict she had with Ernesto which was related to other conflicts that her siblings had with him: he was living in one of the holding’s assets, a local apartment, and would not leave, nor indicate when

²¹ Pinochet’s regime formally ended in 1989, and this consultation was many years later. However, Pinochet had never been arrested, and his cronies remained powerful. I knew the laughter was an anxious laughter brought about by openly playing with powerful and dangerous imagery. The reader should be aware the persons all over Latin America knew of Pinochet and his death squads and torture chambers; the reader should not presume that the consultation was in a particular country just because we used Pinochet as a metaphor for a repressive regime.

he might leave, and he owed a huge debt to the holding because he had not paid his rent. I began to elaborate her story with her, asking her to start with what was at the heart of this issue. She indicated that it was a matter of “justice” and started to cry. I then expressed disbelief because “justice” was too cold a concept to be at the heart of such hot tears. She then broke completely down and her brothers started to get up to leave the room, clearly very agitated by her strong feelings. I asked them to sit back down and watch her learn about herself, as she would be a good model for them. She began to stop crying and I asked her to find the beginning of the “spaghetti” ---a metaphor for locating the start of something when it is all twisted about other stories (spaghettis). She then told how she wanted to be able to use that apartment when she came “home” for a visit, because she had, in the last five years, married and moved out of the country, to another country. She cried hard, telling about how difficult it was to be separated, how sad she was and how she wanted to be sure she would always be able to come back. I described her as “homeless” and she expressed relief with that frame. I turned to Ernesto, and asked him how long he had lived in his “home” and Dora erupted in protest. I asked her to be quiet and listen, as he had done for her. So I elaborated this description with Ernesto of his “home,” how long he had lived there, and what kinds of things he especially liked about it. I then asked him if he really did like it because of its features, or because it was “free.” I smiled at him and wagged my finger at him, as though he were being naughty. He immediately smiled, looked sheepish, and then began to protest that he could not pay. I blocked that protest, and asked the question again. He then brought up his head and said that he liked it and his girlfriend liked it because it was filled with local charm---the girlfriend thought it had “character.” Dora erupted again, switching to Spanish, calling the girlfriend bad names and the two of them started shouting insults at each other. I intervened, physically, by moving my chair across the room to sit smack in front of them. I wagged my finger again at Ernesto and told him that there were logically two possibilities: (1) he only wanted to live there because it was free, and he wanted to keep that a secret because a grown man, such as himself, would understandably be ashamed about that; or (2) he really did like it and for him, it was a “home.” He readily reaffirmed the latter choice (which was hardly a choice as I framed it). And I then said that a “home” is a place you choose to live and this was his chosen place to live and people pay for and take care of their homes. He could see that I was going to put him on the spot to make a promise to pay monthly rent. So he said that he would agree to pay money monthly, but he could not pay the back rent. We agreed as a group on the monthly rent and I tabled the back rent till later.

I then asked Dora if she thought the solution was acceptable, and she very begrudgingly agreed; however, she did not look at me. So I reached out and touched her hand and called her name. She started to cry but she would not speak. I reached to hold her hand, and she pulled back. I then told her that I was afraid that I had done something that had ruined our relationship, but she would not answer me. So I got off my chair, genuinely moved, and sat, knees bent beneath me, in front of her, and asked her to please not leave me “alone” in the cold like a “homeless” person. She never did look at me, but she reached out and touched my face, as I was sitting beneath her and in front of her. I held her hand to my face and started to cry, and so did her brothers. I sat there for some moments, and then stood up, and said I was glad I had a home away from home. Ernesto then reached for her on the sofa, wrapped his arms around her, and said that she was always welcome in his home, and he would love it if she would stay with him when she came for a visit. I went to the bathroom for a tissue, and we then took a break. We never discussed what had happened, what she thought about it. And what’s more, there was no discussion of the other conflicts that people had told me, backchannel, before the meeting, they

had with their brother. On a final note, Dora later provided a home away from home for Ernesto, in her house.

From “Random Unfairness” to “Kisses”

On the last day, the sibling group had indicated that they wanted to raise the issue that some of them had been the lucky recipients of bonuses, just because of gender (Dora got a big bonus when she got married) or because of their role in the small holding (the President Brother); the others wanted there to be some equity adjustment (payments) to those that had not gotten bonuses. (Note: Ernesto had never gotten a bonus, of course!).

I thought this was a very problematic story, as there was no way to “restore” balance in a context that would be forever unbalanced (Dora would always be a woman, for example). I suggested that we at least build a pact to handle future “kisses” from Pinochet. There was more hilarity, as they played games kissing each other and sneaking hands around for the other’s wallet. They played with what kind of kisses---ritualized kisses (not much money), affectionate kisses, (more money), slobbery kisses when Pinochet had too much to drink (loads of money that then later was requested to be returned). They practiced on each other, and there was much laughter---most of this was in Spanish.

I asked them to reconstruct any pattern they might be able to discern to these kisses. It turned out that no one was able to predict who would get money (except for Dora’s wedding); as they compared notes, it became clear that they had, on different occasions, gone to Pinochet independently, asking for a special favor for a particular need. Then more hilarity erupted as they began to compare notes on particular strategies that they had privately tried out that had failed (do it after dinner at his house; call him and ask for a meeting at the office; get his wife to mention it to him; send him a formal letter with bill enclosed). And then I asked them to show me how he “rejected” them, and they started, in Spanish, to play the role of Pinochet, wiggling out of the requests, ignoring, changing the subject, promising to call the next day, agreeing but then never following through, etc.

By the time we had reviewed the nature and number of the requests they had made, the nature and number of rejections, I asked them how many cousins they had in the family---they indicated there were 15 at their generation, and about 30 people at the next generation. Total there were about 50 family members with their hands out, “whimpering” for money on a regular basis. And because we had had so much fun role-playing Pinochet, I started role-playing what they sounded like to him---the requests were numerous, most for frivolous things, then I started exaggerating the way they were in turn exaggerating their needs: “I recently found out that I have a rare disease indicated by my skin getting whiter and whiter---the doc says I need a month on the beach, and so my cure will only cost \$5 million. They were howling with laughter and made up some more of these requests.

I then sat down and said that I felt sorry for anyone trying to hold onto a single penny in their family, that Pinochet most likely has to impose “martial law” because “otherwise the countryside will be overrun by brats!” They stopped laughing, and I went on, elaborating a story about Pinochet, as being forced into his role, in a social/political context of corruption where there is never reward for transparency. I then drew two triangles, one inverted on the top of the other, and indicated that Pinochet is at the intersection of these triangles, as he sits at the top of the hierarchy of the family and yet at the bottom of a system much larger than the family, a system where there is enormous “noise” that requires constant attention, alertness, and skills at

corruption. The more noise they made from below, the more difficult they made his job. They looked confused---I was still using the name “Pinochet” but now I was telling a “hard-luck” story about how hard his job was. I then asked each one to imagine that they would have \$10 million and imagine that they had 30 family members, none of whom were earning any money and all of whom were living on the assets; then they had to tell me how they would plan to apportion the wealth during their life---what portion would they save, what portion would they put in trust, what would be the conditions of the trusts, etc. They quickly agreed that it would be a nightmare to get the family to not spend the assets but to re-invest them. We spent the remainder of the day working with the accountant on their own small holding to reach an agreement about a) the total nest egg they needed; b) the percent of monthly income to be re-invested; c) the percent to put to re-capitalization; and d) the percent to be put in an “entrepreneurial fund” that they could each access as start up funds for a business, encouraging the development of the private businesses outside the holding; and e) they settled on a percent they would pay to themselves as “allowance.” They agreed to then present this, as a business plan, in an act of transparency, to Pinochet. The President Brother reported an increased in his access to confidential information as Pinochet began to trust them. The brother either started or continued to develop businesses. Dora began her family and later opened her own business, which became a resource for the small holding. In this segment of the work, the group went from accusing each other of collusion with Pinochet’s random distributions, to taking responsibility, as a group, for building their own economic security and stability. They expressed considerable pride about their business decisions. In the discussion that follows, I will try to weave together some thoughts on what I have learned from this case regarding the relation between witnessing, liminality, and tipping points, in meaning and relational systems.

Reversals, Paradox, and “Stripping”: Pressing down the Clutch on Narrative Processes²²

There are multiple features of these tipping points, made possible in and through the creation of liminal spaces. First, tipping points take place during and in the context of narrative elaboration. They are engendered through interaction, and more specifically, interactions that involve the elaboration of suffering. However, this elaboration, in turn, is not the passive process associated with “reflective listening” but rather a highly agentic engagement that directs, demands, invites, cajoles, narratives toward a particular evolution toward stories that exhibit:²³

- Positive (legitimate) positions for speaker and other core characters
- Plots that exhibit circular logics, in which the actions of speaker are both cause by and causes for other’s actions, particularly when the outcome of the narrative is negative
- Value sets that are complex, composed of more than one binary set of value opposites (themes)

²² I learned to drive a car with a standard, as opposed to automatic, transmission. When the clutch is depressed, the engine disengages the flywheel, within the bell housing. One can press the gas, but the car is literally not “in gear.”

²³ The features listed here are, in part, taken from Sluzki (1992) paper “Better-Formed Stories.” He argues that narrative should be evaluated morally, following VonForester’s injunction, “Act so as to increase options.” I have since argued (Cobb, 2003, 2006 and 2013) that narratives which increase options are those that a) have positive roles for speakers and characters, complex and circular plots that manifest interdependence of actors’ action, and a varied and complex value set, rather than a binary value set that is highly polarized.

- Temporal dimensions that include past, present, and future

Collectively, these are features of “better-formed” stories. The practice of witnessing suffering, in a way that leads to tipping points, is generative of narratives with these features. In this case, the siblings began with a set of victim stories, and victimizers included Ernesto and the uncle. By the end of the meeting, all characters, including Pinochet, were legitimized and their suffering recognized and included. The plot line in the beginning had no future, as the focus was completely on the past, centered on accusations and personal recriminations. By the end, they had a plan for the future, as well as present activities/preoccupations and a rich past. In the beginning, accusations and complaints were the most frequent speech act; there were several people who defined themselves as victims of Ernesto, and everyone was a victim of the uncle. By the end, the uncle was still a victimizer, but one that was much more complex in that victimization, and most importantly, none of the members of the group framed themselves or each other as victims.²⁴ Thus, as I have argued elsewhere,²⁵ it was not the “listening” to the “bad uncle” stories that brought these siblings to the edge of the limits of their narratives; this is why, I would argue, reflective or active listening, does not foster change, much less the materialization of liminal space, where folks can play in the “between” places. I “thickened” their stories. Collectively, through my questions, we framed the context as one that was impossible to change. This pushed them to the threshold of their stories---unless action/agency was possible as a condition of being, there was no point in trying, and no hope for the future. I reduced hope, quite actively.

Liminal spaces seem to appear associated to three kinds of discursive activity, creating the space for tipping points:²⁶ (1) reversals in meaning/roles; (2) paradoxical meanings, and what Turner has called (3) “stripping.” (Note: These may well be overlapping). Reversals in meaning and roles populated my work with this family. For example, Pinochet was both a terrible dictator and then a beleaguered leader. Ernesto was first a “mooch” and then a “macho man” who cared for his home, and loved both his woman and his sister. Dora was first an entitled victim of Ernesto’s irresponsibility and then she was a victim of the complexity of her own “choice” as to here she had chosen to call “home.” The group went from a story about the lack of their resources and the random nature of their financial universe to a story about their own competency to grow their business and act with fiscal maturity and planning. There were specific points where I created reversals that open the group to a new narrative:

- I located Pinochet at both the top and the bottom of a “triangle” depicting very clearly the reversal of his location in the world, and reversing the story about him as victimizer.

²⁴ I made an effort to inoculate the group against victim stories by giving a little mini-lecture on what they are, how to know when you are in their clutches, what to do to get out of the clutches of the victim story. I used, as an example, a dream that I once had in which I was on a boat, on a stormy sea, when I was thrown overboard into the cold ocean. By an accident of nature, I ended up in a current that washed me to shore. I crawled onto the beach exhausted, only to discover two very handsome men, in Italian style bathing suits, offering to help me. They got me a chair, brought me drinks and food, and I fell happily asleep. However, when I awoke, I was actually tied to the chair, and could not escape. I interpreted the dream to refer to the seduction of victim stories---they are a relief to tell, but just as you get comfortably situated in them, you find yourself a prisoner.

²⁵ See Cobb (2003).

²⁶ These three are also recognized in the writing of D’Agostino (2001); but I independently “found” them in this case study as well.

- Dora began the “home” conversation assuming that it was Ernesto that was “homeless”--- I reversed this, elaborating the apartment as *his* home, and elaborating her as homeless.
- At one point in the “kisses” discussion, I called the group a bunch of “brats” (“mal educados”) and they laughed, even though they started the conversation complaining that they did not get enough money from Pinochet.

Additionally there were several instances of paradoxes:

- In the opening conversation, I declared myself “helpless” even though I was the expert. An elaboration of my incompetency created a liminal space, a threshold that allowed the development of the story of the regime of oppression.
- At another level, this same conversation, the one that lead up to my declaration of helplessness, was paradoxical: they were complaining that they needed something to change, yet the way we elaborated the story there was absolutely no possibility of any change in the environment. The thorough exhaustion of that narrative created paradox re the context---we were there to develop solutions, yet we were telling a story that denied the possibility of any solutions.

Finally, I think there is a third, very important discursive practice---essential to the creation of liminal space---what Turner refers to as “stripping.” This is a practice that involves taking away the signs/signals that we use to recognize others, making them “socially unrecognizable.” D’Agostino (2001) argues that liminality is not just a “between space” but a particular kind of “between”:

In other words, the fact that liminal beings are “social unrecognizable” is marked by their being stripped, ritually, of all the markers of social recognizability---all the various material embodiments of their particular and concrete social status within the world of everyday life...So the first point about liminality is that it’s not just some vague in-between state; it is, rather, a very specific kind of in-between state---the kind that involves (in the limit) stripping away one’s socially identifying features (p.70).

In the context of this case, my renaming “uncle” as Pinochet not only created relational (familial) distance, but it simultaneously confirmed their stories of victimization, *and* enabled them to begin to name the rules of the regime. From this perspective, the uncle was stripped of important features, namely, his familial relation. The hilarity and play that followed was a function of being in this liminal phase which makes tipping possible.²⁷

²⁷ The research on the stability of meaning, attributed to discursive structure and processes by theorists such as Gramsci, Althusser and Shapiro accents the persistence and reproduction of meaning, as opposed to its dynamic evolution. However, given the importance of the research on the politics of meaning, it is imperative that their work be included in theorizing the transformation of meaning. Turner’s (1982) concept of “liminality” provides a framework for linking the structural approaches to discourse to a theory of change processes.²⁸ Apolitical ethnography has been thoroughly trounced by critical ethnographers who argue that the “writing culture,” describing the folk patterns/way of others is a process that implicates the world of the writer. The introduction of reflexivity into ethnographic studies has been generative of questions about the role of the knower and the known. As a result, the ethnographic process itself has been reconceptualized as a collaboration between the “observer” and the “observed.” Thus the validity of the work no longer rests on objectivity, but the degree to which the subjectivity of both knower and known are made transparent in the process. Again, see Clifford and Marcus’s (1986) *Writing Culture*.

In what was perhaps the most emotionally powerful point of the work, I made myself socially “unrecognizable” by getting out of my chair, kneeling on the floor, in a position of despair and supplication in front of Dora. Clearly this was more for me than a consulting problem. The disruption in the relationship (I pushed too hard---I left her no way out...) left me feeling homeless and alone, far from my own country, working in another language, a guest in their home, where I was to act like a professional.

In summary, I find these three elements, reversals, paradox, and “stripping” to be discursive practices associated to the creation of liminal space, which, in turn, makes “tipping” possible, in the process of witnessing.

Conclusion

Consistent with the apolitical nature of most ethnography,²⁸ Turner and others interested in “thresholds” have a rather value neutral agenda; they are describing the role of liminality in social process, and tracking the emergence of new phenomenon---new identities (as some of these rituals make passages from one stage of life, or stage of relationship to another) and what Turner calls “*communitas*.” As I explained earlier, he defines this as the state of relationships that emerges when social hierarchy is erased, or inverted. I am not convinced of this, for two reasons: a) this presumes that what emerges in the liminal phase of ritual is some de-politicized set of relationships, and, given that there is never a place without meaning, a “no-meaning zone,” there would always be politics associated to any space where people are relating, and certainly where they are working out conflicts and problems (Cobb, 2013); and b) if this concept of “liminality” or “threshold” is valuable to negotiation it should not be because it promises us a space where we can return to the garden, innocent of our nakedness, and able to erase the pain, the fear that arises from the accumulation of suffering. So I would prefer to either redefine *communitas* or to define anew the product of the liminal phase.

Following my experience in this case, what emerged from these liminal spaces was not simply “togetherness” but a collective anchoring in a morality that functioned at a meta-level as a practice of *recognizing/acknowledging both self and others as moral agents*, as actors struggling to be good. This does not simply imply that people *share* a common moral framework;²⁹ rather, it refers to a doubled reflexive attention, by self, to a) the nature of their own moral framework; and b) the nature of moral action itself as action that arises from good intentions, within a complex social context. Thus it requires a shift from attention to moral outcomes, to attention to the social construction of *moral intentions in context*. Thus recognizing self and other as moral agents is *not* about

²⁸ Apolitical ethnography has been thoroughly trounced by critical ethnographers who argue that the “writing culture,” describing the folk patterns/way of others is a process that implicates the world of the writer. The introduction of reflexivity into ethnographic studies has been generative of questions about the role of the knower and the known. As a result, the ethnographic process itself has been reconceptualized as a collaboration between the “observer” and the “observed.” Thus the validity of the work no longer rests on objectivity, but the degree to which the subjectivity of both knower and known are made transparent in the process. Again, see Clifford and Marcus’s (1986) *Writing Culture*.

²⁹ I have long had a negative and visceral reaction to “common ground” as it performs a terrible reduction and oversimplification of how *communitas* is formed. The argument I am making above, that the reciprocal recognition of self/other as moral agent is *not* equivalent to sharing a moral framework, is perhaps a first glimmer, for me, of how I might be able to name and address the source of my discomfort with “common ground.”

creating a shared moral framework, but about the social construction of morality itself, as stories about positive intentions that underlie actions in context. From this perspective, the practice of witnessing, the place where liminal processes reside, is the process core to the creation of morality, again, not as a specific ethical framework, but as a second-order normative frame which “rights” stories³⁰ so that all characters and the narrator hold legitimate positions in the stories (Moghaddam, Fathali M., Rom Harre, and Naomi Lee, 2009).

Looking back at the case, in each place where there was reversal, paradox or stripping, what followed was the elaboration of a moral story that collectively elaborated others a) having a choice to be either bad or good, and b) *witnessing* their choice to be good, to do right by others, within the value system that is operant at that moment. From my experience, this is the foundation for ethical conflict resolution or negotiation practice and provides a basis for a call for further research on liminal spaces.

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³⁰ I may be inventing a new field---“ortho” conflict resolution! I argue in *Speaking of Violence: The Politics and Poetics of Narrative in Conflict Resolution*, that the field of narrative studies has shied away from designating some narratives as “better” than others, preferring a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive lens. However, drawing on case studies, I note that it is possible to distinguish between problematic narratives that generate conflict, and those that are productive of the transformation of conflict.

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