

## 5 | *The Micro-sociology of Conflict Transformation*

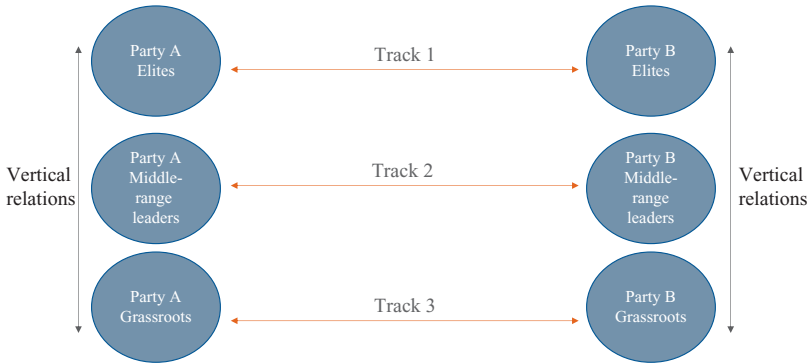
This chapter introduces the micro-sociological approach to the study and practice of conflict transformation. While the conflict transformation literature often reflects micro-sociological insights into changing interaction (e.g., Kelman 2007), conflict transformation has rarely been analyzed from a micro-sociological approach. The chapter builds on insights from some of the few exceptions (David 2020; Rossner 2013) together with my own observations from cases of conflict transformation in Colombia, Israel–Palestine, and Northern Ireland. Unlike traditional conceptions of conflict resolution and transformation, the micro-sociological approach does not seek to address the root causes of a conflict in the sense of “that which the conflict is about,” but rather change the interaction patterns and the larger web of relations sustaining and making up the intergroup or international conflict. Rather than a tree with deep roots, conflict is envisioned as a system of rhizomes; that is, a web of interactions. The chapter discusses how antagonistic interaction can be disrupted and transformed with the assistance of a mediator or through social activities, and how rituals of apology and reconciliation can restore relationships. Moreover, the chapter analyzes the micro-sociological significance of turning points in processes of dialogue, how shared laughter can play a transformative role in conflict transformation efforts, as well as how face-to-face dialogue can reflect domination interaction. Finally, the chapter discusses the challenges to conflict transformation, including how dialogue can reinforce asymmetrical power relations and cement oppositional identity formations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Elements of this chapter are derived, in part, from an article published in *Third World Quarterly* (published online on October 22, 2021, available online: [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2021.1976631](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2021.1976631)).

## Literature on Conflict Transformation

Conflict transformation is a multidimensional concept that entails a broad societal, political, and interactional shift from what is considered destructive and antagonistic conflict to constructive and agonistic engagements with conflictuality in society (Kriesberg 2007; Strömbom 2019). Conflict transformation was first coined by John Poul Lederach in the late 1980s. Lederach had been engaged in conflict resolution efforts in Latin America and had encountered considerable resistance among participants toward the idea of resolving conflicts, which was seen as a Western “fixing” strategy: “[R]esolution carried with it a danger of co-optation, an attempt to get rid of conflict when people were raising important and legitimate issues” (Lederach 2003, 3). Lederach (1996) therefore suggested the concept of conflict transformation to capture a more transformative approach that did not necessarily lead to a particular outcome in the form of a resolution but rather the transformation of the relationships. The concept of conflict transformation has been taken up by several other scholars, notably Johan Galtung (1996, 2000) and Diana Francis (2002), and has “enormously influenced the policy discourse and practice of supporting the ‘local’” (Paffenholz 2014, 11).

Importantly, conflict transformation is not just focused on the elite level (e.g., in the form of peace talks) but also on initiatives and dialogue taking place on multiple tracks. Conflict transformation literature distinguishes between activities on three tracks (Bramsen and Hagemann 2021). Track 1 refers to the elite level with heads of state, military commanders, and resistance group leaders (Figure 5.1). Track 2 includes people who have the potential to influence those around them via their positions, such as schoolteachers, journalists, religious leaders, and academics. Finally, Track 3 includes grassroots and civil society. Conflict transformation is focused on transformation on all these tracks, essentially being “an open-ended, long-term, multi-track and dynamic process, which significantly widens the scope of actors involved” (Reimann 2013, 55). Conflict transformation is not only concerned with improving the horizontal relations between conflicting parties but also vertical relations, between different levels of society, such as between the elite and civil society representatives in the form of national dialogue processes (Lederach 1997). The following model (Figure 5.1) illustrates the link between the three



**Figure 5.1** Vertical and horizontal relations on three tracks<sup>2</sup>

tracks of conflict transformation and the vertical and horizontal axes of interaction.

Due to its focus on the potentially constructive and transformative potential of conflict, nonviolent resistance, which is addressed in Chapter 4, is often a central part of conflict transformation (Reimann 2013). Conflict transformation is related to the concept of agonistic peace, which implies that the aim of conflict resolution and peace-building efforts should not be to end conflict but rather to transform antagonistic relations into agonistic ones and continue the conflict with nonviolent, political means (Shinko 2008; Strömbom 2019; Strömbom and Bramsen 2022; Strömbom et al. 2022).

## The Micro-sociology of Conflict Transformation

Conflict transformation and the conflict resolution literature often emphasize that efforts at transforming a conflict should address the root causes of the conflict rather than mere symptom treatment (Galtung 1996; Lederach 2005; Ramsbotham et al. 2016). In contrast, the micro-sociological approach is not focused on any pre-given “root causes” of conflict, as they are not perceived to be the main factor continuously moving actors to engage in conflict (Collins 2012). Rather, the rationalities of engaging in conflict emerge in and with the process of conflict. As argued by Collins (2008, 337), “multiple,

<sup>2</sup> Inspired by Lederach (1997) but redrawn to clarify the difference between horizontal and vertical relations in conflict-affected societies.

shifting accounts of what the conflict is about are part of the texture of the action itself, not something that stands behind it and guides it like a puppeteer pulling the strings.” It is the conflict dynamic itself that keeps feeding into the conflict, thereby producing and reproducing its own prerequisite: “[T]he main elements and structures of conflict development are self-referentially ‘produced’ by conflicts themselves” (Messmer 2007, 90). In other words, conflict is less about actual gains or deprived needs (although groups certainly may have valid, unfulfilled needs) and more about relative gains, resisting domination, and the character of the interactions (Waltz 1979). It is the opposing positioning of the parties – not the actual deprivation – that is the key factor in the phenomenology of conflict (Wæver and Bramsen 2019), and conflicts are driven by in-group solidarity and highly intense and energizing rituals, such as demonstrations or fighting. The Northern Ireland conflict illustrates the liquid nature of conflict causes. Originally a religious issue, the conflict became a question of nations or ethnicity, then social and cultural matters, and today, in a strange manner, the conflict is very much a product of its previous conflict history structured by parties able to capitalize on their version of the conflict (McQuaid 2015).

This understanding of conflict has profound implications for conflict transformation. Rather than focusing on the “root causes” of conflict like most conflict resolution and transformation literature, a micro-sociological approach instead focuses on changing the interactive dynamic, the level of tension, and the situational circumstances shaping the conflict (Wæver and Bramsen 2019). More than a question of finding rational solutions addressing the (original) root causes and meeting the needs of both parties, conflict transformation is a question of reconfiguring the relations, softening positions, and opening up space for agonistic dialogue (Wæver and Bramsen 2019). However, this is by no means a “quick fix”; in many situations, the habitual practices of interaction have become part of the culture and are profoundly difficult to change and transform. Importantly, it is often not any single, particular relationship or pattern of interaction that must be transformed, but rather the larger web of relations and culture (in the sense of group-patterns of interaction) that should be subject to change for an intergroup or international conflict to be transformed. Whereas some scholars use the term “root causes of conflict” in the sense of “that which the conflict is really about,” Lederach’s conception of root

causes is closer to the micro-sociological approach to conflict transformation conveyed in this chapter. Rather than a specific core issue, contradiction, or incompatibility that keeps feeding the conflict and will continue to sustain the conflict until the issue is resolved, Lederach unfolds a more relational understanding of root causes. For Lederach, the root causes of conflict are not resources or religion but rather the larger web of (violent) relations. Inspired by Lederach, one could argue that rhizomes – the nonlinear network of roots connecting any point to any other point – is a better metaphor for conflicts than a tree, as in the traditional conceptions. The rhizomes metaphor is also applied in philosophy (Deleuze and Guattari 2004) to describe a “process of existence and growth that does not come from a single central point of origin” (Mambrol 2017, 1) and hence fits well with a more decentralized, dynamic, and web-like understanding of conflict.

Following from this web-like conception of conflict, the transformation of conflict becomes a question of addressing the *breadth* rather than *depth* of conflict. In the words of Lederach (2005, 42), conflict transformation aims to “change the flow of human interaction in social conflict from cycles of destructive relational violence toward cycles of relational dignity and respectful engagement.” Compared to psychology, it is less a Freudian approach of digging in past childhood experiences and more about improving the relations surrounding the individual, as in family therapy (e.g., Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1991). Hence, from a micro-sociological perspective, the task in conflict transformation and peacebuilding is to transform the web of relationships characterized by violent conflict. This not only includes relationships between conflicting parties but also *within* conflicting parties at the elite and grassroots levels alike (Bramsen 2022b).

Recognizing conflictual interaction as a particular mode of interaction where a “no” follows another “no” makes it possible to appreciate how difficult it can be to transform this mode as it develops its own momentum and tends to become a self-reinforcing process where the interaction itself produces further conflict (Wæver and Bramsen 2019). As stressed by Kelman (2008, 174), “in intense conflict relationships, the natural cause of interaction between the parties tends to reinforce and deepen the conflict.” This process is captured very precisely by Messmer (2007, 97), who describes conflict intensification as “different communicative styles (contradiction, blaming, threat) which, step by step, capture more time, more issues, more energy and

thus, more and more features of the social relationship (...) thereby transforming agreement into opposition up to the point that no agreement is left.” While inherently challenging, one way to transform conflictual relationships is through dialogue and infrastructure for peace that supports and sustains a dialogical approach to conflict across society.

## **Transforming Antagonistic Relations**

Violent conflict normalizes antagonistic and violent interactions in everyday practices (Aggestam et al. 2015; Shinko 2008). The challenge for conflict transformation is to restructure these relations and disrupt agonistic interaction (Mac Ginty 2022b) to make room for other forms of interaction, whether low-intensity interaction, agonistic conflictual interaction, or even friendly interaction (Bramsen and Poder 2018). As argued by Kelman (2008, 175), “conflict resolution efforts require promotion of a different kind of interaction that is capable of reversing the escalatory and self-perpetuating dynamics of conflict.” In what follows, I will discuss the dialogical dimension of conflict transformation and unfold how antagonistic conflict interaction can be transformed through rituals of reconciliation, dialogue, and social activities.

### *Rituals of Reconciliation*

One way of changing the direction of interaction or interaction ritual chains is to initiate rituals of transition. These can be formal and comprehensive rituals of restoring justice or rebuilding a relationship after war (Brewer 2010; Kong and Broome 2017; Rossner 2013). Many cultures have different scripts for rituals of reconciliation, which are the particular things that opponents can or even should do to overcome their enmity. These rituals of reconciliation are critical for transforming resentment and antagonistic relationships (Ross 2004), and thus a critical aspect of conflict transformation. In Arab cultures, for example, meeting one’s opponent face-to-face has a symbolic meaning in and of itself. One Yemeni peaceworker described how: “in Arabic culture, the traditional way of settling disputes has always depended on gestures (...) you break the ice in very traditional ways” (Interview by Hagemann and author 2020). For example, there is a tradition called “bread and salt” (*khobz wa milleh* / خبز وملح), where former enemies symbolically share bread and salt to reconcile and affirm rapprochement.

Similarly, restorative justice meetings are designed to restore relationships between a victim and a perpetrator. Building on Collins (2004) and analyzing numerous video-recordings of such meetings from a micro-sociological perspective, Rossner (2013, 71) shows how the success of restorative justice meetings in the UK depends less on the nature of the crime or the motivations of the participants and more on “the ability of the conference to take on elements of a successful interaction ritual, carefully guided by the facilitator to produce rhythmic dialogue, emotional entrainment, a balance of power and status, and identifiable emotional ‘turning points’.”

While Rossner’s data stems from restorative justice meetings in the UK, truth and reconciliation commissions, applying the logics of restorative justice mechanisms, have been employed in several post-agreement or post-violence settings from South Africa to Colombia.

Apologies are widely used rituals for restoring relations and common practices in international relations to make up for past wrongdoings: from German apologies to Israel for the Holocaust to the UN apologizing to Rwanda for its reluctance to intervene during the genocide in 1994 (Horelt 2019; Lind 2011; Schneider 2000). Apologies are “remedial interchanges” that can soften up tension and have an impact on political conflict (Goffman 1971), and they can both be given and requested. Apologies can be considered ways of transferring high-currency socioemotional credit and accepting socioemotional discredit (admitting wrongdoing). Inherent to apologies is an element of rebalancing a relationship. Murphy and Hampton (1988, 28) interestingly describe apologies as “a ritual whereby the wrongdoer can symbolically bring himself low”; however, this is also why apologies are so difficult and inherently vulnerable (*ibid.*).

Importantly, restorative justice or dialogue sessions need not include an apology or direct confessions of wrongdoings. As apologizing or admitting wrongdoing can be very emotionally costly, vulnerable, and involve some level of losing face in a Goffmanian sense (Goffman 1959), other, more subtle expressions of approachment<sup>3</sup> may be more bearable in the situation. In truth commissions, the ritual of reconciliation typically involves the perpetrator and victim telling their stories of atrocities, without the former necessarily apologizing or even

<sup>3</sup> Approachment refers to the act of approaching and connecting with an opponent, if only momentarily (Bramsen and Hageman 2021).

expressing regret. The transformative aspect of the encounter lies not necessarily in the apology, but rather in restoring the human connection and some degree of understanding between victim and perpetrator. As described by Jo Berry (2008, 36) in relation to the IRA killing of her father: “I find it hard to say I forgive Pat, I would rather say I understand him. I had an experience where I felt so much empathy for him that I knew that if I had lived his life, I could have made the same choices, and in that moment there was nothing to forgive.”

### *Mediation and Dialogue*

A common way of transforming antagonistic interaction is by introducing a mediator or dialogue facilitator. The literature on mediation has focused on different styles of mediation in terms of forcing or fostering approaches, confidentiality versus openness, and disputant incentives (Hellman 2012; Wallensteen and Svensson 2014). Likewise, the literature shows how mediators can provide information and help invent new options and construct deals (Bercovitch 2011; Kriesberg 2007; Savun 2009).<sup>4</sup> However, little attention has been given to the micro-sociological significance of a third party. From a micro-sociological perspective, one might argue that introducing a mediator to a conflict situation changes the interparty dynamics, regardless of whether the third party is actually intervening. In situations of intense conflict, the presence of a mediator may disrupt the conflictual interaction directly by engaging with the parties and thus changing the formation of the ping-pong duality, possibly slowing down the rhythm of interaction with tone of voice, words, and attitude. Likewise, a mediator can disrupt or shape interaction in more subtle (but often deliberate) ways, such as sighing, looking away, smiling, or using other bodily signals to indicate if a representative of one of the parties may be speaking too long, transgressing norms, or expressing something constructive. For example, a Syrian mediator working with Track 2 dialogue described how he would use his body to express when someone has gone on for too long: “[W]e use our bodies as facilitators in the meetings, so sometimes when somebody is speaking too long, I slowly start moving my body toward them in the middle of the room to block them off

<sup>4</sup> Further review of mediation/peace diplomacy of Track 1 can be found in Chapter 6.



from seeing the others to tell them very gently, kind of like your time is up without shutting them off” (Interview by author and Hagemann 2020). In so doing, a mediator is able to transform the mode of interaction or subtly nudge the conversation to be more balanced, dialogical, and cordial (Saunders 2009). Importantly, the aim of dialogue and mediation is not to avoid conflict; on the contrary, a critical part of dialogue efforts may exactly be to give space to the airing of dissent (as opposed to not communicating). However, there is a risk of conflictual interaction becoming antagonistic and tearing the parties further apart, and mediators sometimes therefore use different tools to cultivate a more dialogical, agonistic way of engaging in conflict.

Mediators can play very different roles in mediation efforts (Lindgren 2016), ranging from mere facilitation to direct involvement, suggesting solutions, and even pressuring the parties to reach a particular solution (Ramsbotham et al. [2016, 29] call this mediation with muscle). For example, Robert Cooper, who mediated the Serbia–Kosovo border dispute on behalf of the EU in 2012, has a very engaged mediation style, where he cracks jokes, suggests options for agreement, and pressures the parties when they are resistant to softening up their position, not necessarily through words as much through his eyes, body posture, or merely by taking off his glasses.<sup>5</sup> Cooper’s highly engaged role in the Serbia–Kosovo talks in 2012 is made clear in a documentary entitled *The Agreement*, which also clearly portrays the considerable respect held by the Serbian negotiator Stefanović for Cooper (Poulsen 2013). At a point when Stefanović ends up responding to the socioemotional discredit expressed by his Kosovan counterpart, Edita Tahiri, with socioemotional discredit, Cooper takes off his glasses and closes his eyes despondently (Image 5.1). In response to these signals, Stefanović states: “Robert, I’m really sorry, but this is too much—it goes on and on and on. If you allow it, then allow it to all. Or don’t allow it at all.” Stefanović’s apology to Cooper shows how the mediator plays a very direct role in setting the frame for the interaction and defining the limits of what can and cannot be said.

In a dialogue between young Kosovo-Albanians and Serbs recorded for another documentary, *Reunion: Ten Years after the War*, the mediator, Steinar Bryn, exercises a relatively engaged form of dialogue

<sup>5</sup> Video material: raw data from *The Agreement*.



**Image 5.1** Robert Cooper takes off his glasses to signal that the parties have gone too far (by Karen Stokkendal Poulsen)

facilitation.<sup>6</sup> Several times during the dialogue, he stops the interaction if it becomes more debate-like than dialogical, urging the parties to listen to and recognize each other. At one point, he tells the participants in a very direct manner: “As long as you don’t recognize each other’s fears and worry about the future, you will never make it!” (Bryn in Haukeland 2011). In an interview with Bryn, he describes how, in cases where there is power asymmetry between the parties either outside the dialogue encounter or within it (e.g., in relation to fluency in English or number of people present from each side), he would try to even that imbalance out via his facilitation (Interview by author 2022).

Besides evening out the power imbalance, mediators and dialogue facilitators can help parties challenge the no-no composition of interaction. This can be achieved by setting “interaction rules that can enable disputants to discuss differences, yet minimize adversarial argument” (Kriesberg 2007, 219), for example, by encouraging conflicting parties to ask questions of each other. As Bryn expresses it, unlike in

<sup>6</sup> In an interview with Bryn, he mentions that the documentary was cut in a way that made him appear more active in shaping the dialogue than he actually was during the whole course of the dialogue. On a methodological note, Bryn mentioned that he did not notice any difference in how participants were behaving on and off camera (Interview by author 2022).

negotiations, “the essence of dialogue is movement.” In a dialogue session between Serbs and Albanians recorded in *Reunion: Ten Years after the War*, he instructs the parties to prepare a set of questions for one another: “Think about 3–4 questions that you want to raise, not to score a point, but because you really want to hear the answer” (Bryn in Haukeland 2011). Bryn describes how this is something that he very often asks participants to do and that it has the potential to change the dynamic of interaction. Likewise, mediators can challenge the no-no script of conflictual interaction by nudging the parties to substitute the negating action with a more open though not necessarily affirmative approach. Laurie Nathan, a South African mediator, describes how he applies this very deliberately in mediation efforts, telling the parties to say “yes” instead of “no”:

I'll say to each of them separately and I'll say it to all of them if they are in the same room: Stop saying “no.” You don't have to say “yes”—you can say “yes if.” I encourage you to say “yes, if:” “I will do this, yes, *if* my opponent does that.” Because then you're starting to bargain. As long as you just say “no” to everything the mediator says, and everything the opponent says, we're stuck and we will stay here forever. So stop saying “No!” Say, “yes but...” or “yes, if.” (Laurie Nathan, personal communication)

In addition to nudging parties to engage in more agonistic, dialogical manners, mediators can help translate the different concerns of the parties into a language that is expressed by the other party as less hurtful. For example, a Syrian mediator working with Track 2 mediation described how they would often have two mediators: One facilitating the dialogue while the other writes WhatsApp messages to each party to ease the dialogue. Such WhatsApp messages might be to the effect of: “I see you're not very comfortable with what has been said—do you want a clarification?” or “Wait a minute, don't misunderstand what's being said—she's probably referring to this” (Interview by Hagemann and author 2020). In so doing, a mediator can translate the utterings of the parties and sort out misunderstandings, thereby avoiding an exchange of socioemotional discredit.

### *Social Activities*

A major aspect of conflict transformation and peacebuilding work includes non-dialogue activities, such as engaging in drama plays, cross-community sports games, cultural activities, hiking, sharing

meals, or simply spending time together in breaks between sessions (e.g., Rookwood and Palmer 2011; Scannell 2010). These activities can all be seen as ways of engaging in non-conflictual activities; that is, activities that are not about the conflict (as in dialogue where conflicting issues are addressed or the fighting itself). Such activities can cultivate an awareness of intersectionality, that each participant has numerous identities, not only belonging to another ethnic/religious/national group but also being, for example, a football player. From a micro-sociological perspective, such activities can also cultivate another mode of interaction than conflict, with participants engaging with each other in other ways than they would usually do or than would be prescribed by their oppositional positioning. Engaging in different forms of friendly interaction may then energize participants and cultivate social bonds between them.

Besides short-term social activities, conflicting parties can spend time together for several days (or even months), hence engaging in numerous non-conflict activities and potentially transforming their relationships more comprehensively. Bryn, the Norwegian dialogue facilitator, describes in an interview how these long-term programs have been some of the most effective. In the 1990s and early 2000s, he and the Nansen Dialogue Network organized three-month-long stays for conflicting parties from the Balkans in Lillehammer, Norway. Here, participants lived in close proximity, engaged in activities together, and little by little developed social bonds across community divides over the course of the stay. Bryn describes how: “The more I think about it (...) the dialogue itself is less important when compared to the living arrangements (...) that ‘other interaction’ I would say today, was more important than I knew or understood at the time” (Interview by author 2022). Bryn gives several examples of people from opposing sides of the Balkans conflict participating in enjoyable, interesting, or even scary activities together. For example, he recounts a situation where he would arrange for participants to climb down a mountain together: “It’s physically powerful, scary. So when people came down, they had done something together—you know, they had done something similar together, that created some kind of bond” (Interview by author 2022). From a micro-sociological perspective, such intense and focused activities across conflict divides can be seen as a way of promoting other forms of interaction capable of generating social bonds.

Micro-sociological insights may be of value for organizing social and cultural activities in conflict transformation. How do we best create mutual focus of attention and a barrier to outsiders? How can momentum be generated prior to activities? For example, Lund (2017, 75) observes and records two drama plays as part of peacebuilding activities in Uganda. In one such play, the group of actors started by walking around the village, playing music and singing to attract people to participate in the play. Lund describes how this contributed to building excitement, enthusiasm, and momentum up to the play. It generated a mutual focus of attention, rhythmic entrainment, and collective effervescence during the play, which stood in contrast to another play where the actors just started right away without any such warmup (Bramsen and Poder 2018; Lund 2017).

### **Critical Interaction-Dynamics in Conflict Transformation**

When analyzing dialogue and conflict transformation in a micro-sociological framework, emphasis is placed on the inter-bodily, situational processes of interaction rather than the cognitive dimensions, which are often analyzed in the literature on dialogue (e.g., Ron and Maoz 2013; Sternberg et al. 2018). The dynamics of interaction themselves are in focus, not the cognitive changes in the understanding of the opponent. Hence, many aspects of dialogue can be analyzed in a new light when applying a micro-sociological approach. Here, I will focus on three such aspects or critical interaction-dynamics in conflict transformation: turning points, humor, and domination.

#### *Turning Points*

In her Collins-inspired analysis of restorative justice sessions, Rossner (2013) emphasizes the significance of *turning points*; that is, points in the restorative justice rituals where a certain shift occurs, however subtle, in which participants connect with each other despite differences and conflict. Such turning points are also critical in dialogue and mediation efforts (Jameson et al. 2014), and they can imply an expression of vulnerability, understanding, or the softening up of a position. An example of such a turning point is found in the first meeting between Jo Berry, the daughter of a Northern Irish republican politician, and Patrick Magee, a former member of the Irish Republican

Army, who killed Berry's father (Berry 2008). Berry and Magee have traveled around the world describing their meeting and the transformative process that they have been through. Berry describes the first meeting with Magee as "a profoundly healing experience." She describes how Magee was initially "wearing his political hat, justifying the strategy, explaining the aims of the IRA." After Berry expressed her experience with losing her father, a turning point occurred where Magee let go of the "political hat," defending his actions, and instead "stopped talking, rubbed his eyes, and said "I want to hear your anger, I want to hear your pain" (Berry 2008, 35). Berry describes how "It was a moment that marked the beginning of another journey as he opened up and became vulnerable" (Ibid.).

Similarly, Hicks (2021), who has facilitated reconciliation meetings between perpetrators and victims in Northern Ireland, describes such a turning point where a visible shift was observable not only in the victim but also in the perpetrator as he was met with understanding from the victim. The victim expressed the transformative effect of listening to the perpetrator's story: "[W]hat I realized now after listening to your story is how difficult it must have been growing up under those conditions. And I believe that if I had grown up under the same circumstances, I would have done the same thing" (Hicks 2021, 182) and Hicks, as co-facilitator, observes how this generated a turning point: "I watched his face soften and his shoulders drop. The steely resolve disappeared" (ibid.).

From a micro-sociological perspective, these turning points can be considered shifts in the modes of interaction: from antagonistic, conflictual interaction to a friendlier mode of engagement. The turning points or transformative moments should be ascribed to the ritual of interacting in itself (i.e., neither something structural nor outside the interaction), and is facilitated by respectful engagement and a space for listening to an opponent. While there is a cognitive element to this increased understanding of one's opponent's situation (Ron and Maoz 2013; Sternberg et al. 2018), the micro-sociological lenses make visible the socioemotional dimension that relates to the act of engaging in the dialogical ritual itself with mutual focus of attention and rhythmic entrainment, not (just) the cognitive understanding that one might gain from learning the perspective of an opponent. It is not only transmission of knowledge about the other, but the listening, intimate interaction and falling into each other's bodily rhythms that

matters. Most mediators and participants in reconciliation activities are aware of these noncognitive elements of relational transformation but rarely have the vocabulary to express them.<sup>7</sup> Micro-sociology provides such a vocabulary.

Bryn, the Norwegian dialogue facilitator, likewise describes turning points or breakthrough moments and how facilitators can sense when such moments are about to happen and how important it is not to cut off the dialogue for program-related purposes when such a turning point is about to occur:

You can't predict a breakthrough at one o'clock. So you start talking in the morning, and at one o'clock we've ordered a guide at the local museum. So at 12.30, something happens in the room. You're really, really getting closer to whatever it is that you're trying to get closer to. And my assistant is knocking on the door, saying "Hey, you have to get ready for the museum!" And I say, "We can't go to the museum now! Are you crazy? We're about to have a breakthrough! (Interview by author 2022)

This illustrates how turning points cannot be planned or enforced by the mediator or anyone else; they must develop organically from the interaction itself. While turning points can be critical in dialogical interaction, it is important to emphasize how the transformation of conflictual relations may not always occur through a turning point but can also develop gradually with subtle, almost invisible interactional change.

### *Shared Laughter*

From a micro-sociological perspective, shared laughter can be considered an intense interaction ritual contributing to the buildup of collective effervescence. As pointed out by Collins (2004, 65), "the sounds of laughter are bodily produced by rhythmic repetition of breaths caught and forcefully expelled; at the height of hilarity, this

<sup>7</sup> For example, when I participated in a talk by Berry and Magee in Belfast in 2022, I asked whether the transformative aspect of their first meeting was primarily cognitive in terms of seeing the other as a human being (which is what they usually emphasize). To this question, Berry pointed out the importance of emotions, sensations, and being in the same room. However, my impression was that despite having traveled around the world telling the story, she lacked a vocabulary for describing the noncognitive, inter-bodily elements of the transformative encounter.

happens involuntarily.” Hence, while shared laughter is essentially “merely an uncontrollable interruption of breathing patterns,” it “illustrates both the collective and rhythmically entraining aspect of micro-interactive ritual” (Collins 2004, 66). Engaging in shared laughter with an enemy can therefore be a transformative endeavor, lightening up the interaction pattern, softening up tension and thus potentially changing the script of interaction. Hence, humor can play a significant role in changing the dynamics of interaction – from antagonistic to agonistic or even friendly – but can obviously also be misunderstood or used to dominate rather than to connect with an opponent. Humor and its applicability for handling misrecognition (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019), managing anxiety (Brassett et al. 2020), and decreasing tensions in conflicts (Kopper 2020) is increasingly recognized in International Relations (IR) and peace research. Humor is a well-known tool for easing tensions in conflict situations, as argued by Kopper (2020, 6): “[A] well-weighted remark may not only point out the absurdity of a situation, but may also provide the means to relieve tension.”

Based on observations of conflict transformation activities in Gambia, Davidheiser (2006, 845) describes how applying humor in conflict transformation can “open up liminal space in which the transcendence of ordinary boundaries and scripts becomes possible” and can provide “a script for cooperative interaction.” By disrupting the ordinary mode of interaction and allowing for a more jovial tone, even if the stakes and tensions are high, the application of humor generates “an extraordinary, ritualized social space and heightens possibilities for attitudinal shifts and conflict transformation” (ibid.). Davidheiser further argues that mediators can apply humor directly to “create an atmosphere in which the parties are expected to be flexible and forthcoming” (Davidheiser 2006, 844); hence, nudging the parties to soften up their positions.<sup>8</sup>

As mentioned in the section on the micro-sociological significance of the mediator above, Robert Cooper employed a very engaged style of mediation when mediating the Serbia–Kosovo border disputes on behalf of the EU in 2012. The recording of the negotiation reveals how Cooper applies humor to ease tensions; for example, when the

<sup>8</sup> However, mediators should of course be careful not to indicate in any way that the issue is not serious or be careful not to, for example, connect with one party in a humorous way that may leave the other party feeling outside or dominated (personal conversation with mediator, Mette Juel Madsen).





**Image 5.2** Robert Cooper applies humor to soften up relations between the parties (by Marie Billegrav)

parties enter the first meeting, they have a small, cordial, but conflictual chat about who gets to sit facing the window, with the Kosovan negotiator stating “Borko—you took my seat, but I am tolerant,” followed by laughter (Tahiri in Poulsen 2013). Cooper responds that he prefers the painting by Goya hanging on the wall on the opposite wall of the negotiation room showing two cats fighting, saying: “for my part I don’t know which view I prefer, the glorious architecture of Brussels is not my favorite view, whereas sitting on this side of the table you get to see the Goya picture of the cats fighting each other, I think the problem is that one of the cats hasn’t recognized the other” to which both negotiators laugh, however slightly hesitant (Image 5.2), and the Kosovan negotiator adds “but it will” to which the Serbian negotiator responds: “well, certainly” (Tahiri and Stefanović in Poulsen 2013). Here, Cooper uses the painting to look at the situation from the outside in a humorous manner and ease the tension in the room, however slightly.

Similarly, conflicting parties themselves can express humorous remarks that can ease tensions. For example, in a dialogue session between Kosovo-Albanians and Serbs (Haukeland 2011) where they watch a recording of their dialogue ten years earlier (i.e., before the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia), one participant comments:

Now we’re in the same position as you were 10 years ago: You didn’t accept living under a Serbian roof, now we won’t accept to live under a Kosovan

roof. So we're gonna ask for some support to reach our goals (...) We're gonna need another bombing. (Participant in Haukeland 2011)

The rest of the participants laugh at the joke, and it clearly softens up their tense body postures and attitudes. Making the group laugh about the bombing, which has otherwise been a thorn in the side during the whole dialogue, eases the tension significantly. The joke shows how it is possible to express extreme, dark things that one may not even mean but that nevertheless put things in perspective and expose the absurdity in the situation.

Besides dialogue sessions, humor can also be applied in tense, political environments. In Northern Ireland, the Unionists aiming to be part of Ireland and the Loyalists wanting to stay part of the UK signed a peace agreement in 1998 with which they established a governing body, the Northern Ireland Assembly, where both Loyalists and Unionists could fight for their cause, thereby allowing the conflict to continue via political rather than violent means (Little 2009; O'Leary and McGarry 1998). The opening debate of the Assembly in 2020 shows how important humor can be in softening up tense relations (YouTube 2020b). At the meeting, the Assembly Members laugh five times at different, more or less indirect jokes. For example, Jim Allister, representing the far-right party, TUV, continually interrupts the meeting with criticism of the newly elected speaker and the other members, among other things stating that it is merely "the same old, same old" (YouTube 2020b). Toward the end of the debate, Allister is given the word but responds, "I'll spare you that" (YouTube 2020b), thereby acknowledging his role as a hawk who has obstructed the debate. The other Assembly Members burst into laughter; many bend over backward or clap their hands in amusement. Allister likewise laughs and nods proudly at his well-placed comment (Image 5.3). The Speaker of the Assembly responds: "Thank you for that magnanimous gesture" (YouTube 2020b), which generates further laughter. With the two comments following in quick succession, the Assembly laughs 24 seconds in total.

The incident shows how humor can enable parties to remain true to their position but not so rigidly that they cannot laugh about it. Equally important, the entire chamber laughs at the joke, thus uniting the members in a common bodily rhythm (Collins 2004). In this way, humor may "decrease the distance between the parties involved" (Kopper 2020, 7).



**Image 5.3** Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, including Allister, laughing about Allister sparing the other members of his intervention<sup>9</sup>

The joviality of the 2020 opening debate would likely have been unimaginable in the first Assembly debates immediately after the 1998 Agreement. This change is reflected in the Assembly meeting transcripts, which report that members laughed only 6 times during the totality of 188 meetings from 1998 to 2002, whereas they laughed 227 times in 66 meetings held in 2020 alone. While not every laugh may be joint laughter involving both sides of the room, it does appear to indicate an increased joviality and perhaps even some sort of easing of relations and softening of positions. The increased laughter in the Northern Ireland Assembly shows how humor can be seen not only as a catalyst of conflict transformation but also as an indication that tense relations have softened up.

### *Domination*

While dialogue and conflict transformation activities have the potential to energize and generate social bonds between participants, as shown above, they can also reinforce power-dynamics and be used to dominate opponents, especially in asymmetrical conflicts. Analyzing

<sup>9</sup> The image is reproduced with the permission of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission.

people-to-people dialogue efforts between Israelis and Palestinians from a micro-sociological perspective, David (2020, 134) argues that most dialogue encounters are “characterized by structural inequality and domination between two groups with asymmetric power-relations.”

To exemplify how domination can manifest in micro-interaction, I will analyze a dialogue between three Israelis and three Palestinians, most of them peace activists (YouTube 2020a). The dialogue is organized by an Israeli influencer, Rudy Rochman,<sup>10</sup> who also takes part. While the interaction in the dialogue is generally friendly, Israelis dominate subtly throughout. When it comes to speaking time (not taking into account the short back-and-forth interactions where each party speaks less than 20 seconds at a time), Israelis speak for almost 29 minutes, whereas the Palestinians only get to speak for around 11 minutes. Hence, the Israelis speak almost three times as long as the Palestinians, reflecting the asymmetrical power relations between the two groups in the conflict. Likewise, the Israeli participants dominate the conversation in subtle ways, such as by correcting the Palestinians and subtly talking down to them. For example, one of the Palestinian participants at one point suggests that they forget about the past, which is then corrected by an Israeli:

- PALESTINIAN: “I think that Palestinians hurt Israelis and Israelis hurt Palestinians, and we killed each other enough. So, let’s just forget about it and start a new life. Because I care about the future more than I care about the past.”
- ISRAELI: “But do you want to make the future not like the past?”
- PALESTINIAN: “Yeah exactly.”
- ISRAELI: “So then you have to know about the past.”

In this example and throughout the dialogue, the Palestinian participants come across as very eager to forget about the past and even “love each other,” whereas the Israeli participants try to moderate this and promote their own narrative of how the conflict is to be ended by “changing the way we think.” Whereas the Israelis have numerous corrections to the Palestinians, the Palestinians generally respond affirmatively to the Israeli objections, stating “exactly” and “yeah,

<sup>10</sup> Rochman is a rather controversial figure, producing different videos in which he engages with Jews, critics of Israel, and ordinary people from around the world in the promotion of a pro-Israel narrative and a one-state solution.

exactly,” as in the examples above. In so doing, the Israelis dominate the conversation in both content and form, establishing the rhythm of interaction. Toward the end, one of the Palestinians tries to challenge the argument put forward by the Israelis: that Israelis and Palestinians have suffered equally. But an Israeli participant again sets him straight:

Your main suffering is coming from your inability to transcend a generic narrative. That’s where your main suffering is from. [repeating slowly] You ... are suffering ... from an inability... to transcend ... a generic narrative.

Here, it is visible how the Israeli participant applies academic language to try to shut down the resistance from the Palestinian participants. Differences in educational background can possibly also account for the asymmetrical power interaction in the dialogue. This reflects a general pattern in NGO (Nongovernmental Organization) dialogues in Israel–Palestine, where Israeli participants are often academics whereas Palestinian participants are officials, a pattern that generates “differences in social and cultural codes of interaction” (Aggestam and Strömbom 2013, 122).

Another example of domination in dialogue sessions can be observed in the Colombian National Dialogue in 2019 between the Colombian government and civil society representatives. A video recording of the section on “Peace with Legality”<sup>11</sup> shows how government officials and then Colombian President Duque dominated the interaction at the meeting (YouTube 2019). The first session in particular primarily resembled a dominant form of interaction, where Duque and other members of the government received as many minutes to talk as they wanted, whereas the civil society representatives present were given 1–2 minutes each. As one participant described: “The President could speak whenever he wanted, and he intervened with supremely long speeches. Plus, whenever he felt like it, he gave the floor to his ministers, and that caused the moderators to pressure the participants’ interventions to be shorter and shorter” (Interview by Author and Morales 2021). The meeting starts with Duque and the Vice President giving a 23-minute talk after which participants are allowed to make brief comments. The President interrupted the participants

<sup>11</sup> The section was devoted to discussing the implementation of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC.

twice, first to talk for 9 minutes and later for 17 minutes (YouTube 2019). In these interruptions, the President elaborated on the government policies in very defensive tones, as one participant described: “When I spoke, the President gave back, like, a 30-minute speech, replying to everything, justifying every single thing” (Interview by author and Morales 2020). This (re)established a clear power asymmetry between the government and participants. The President also left the room twice, apparently due to other obligations, and repeatedly spoke to his advisors while participants were giving their input to the dialogue (YouTube 2019). In a micro-sociological sense, the President’s whispering to his officials and coming in and out reduces the focus in the room, thereby further reducing the potential for social bonding. With the government in a clearly dominant position, the Colombian National Dialogue did not produce any such bonding (Bramsen and Morales 2022).

### **Cementation and Performance of Otherness**

The examples from the UK (Rossner 2013) and Northern Ireland (Berry 2008; Hicks 2021) presented above show how friendly interaction can have a transformative effect in conflictual relations. However, while people-to-people meetings can energize and produce social bonds between participants, they may also reinforce us–them divisions by making participants represent two different group identities to which they may have had a more ambiguous relationship with before the dialogue exercise (David 2020). This is the main conclusion of David’s micro-sociological analysis of Israeli–Palestinian dialogue efforts; that the meetings end up reinforcing and to some extent producing opposing intergroup identities:

Bringing participants together into face-to-face encounters in which they are already ascribed roles, has an immediate impact on the ways in which they start forming and negotiating rituals among themselves. From the very beginning, it works as a primary set of references, thus, the interactional rituals that evolve during the process are all seen through the prism of this structured division. In practice, this means that even those participants that have an ambiguous relationship towards their ethnic/religious identity prior to the meetings, are likely to become more attached to their ethnic/religious identity. (David 2019, 6)

This is highly problematic, as the purpose of dialogue efforts may not be to generate new or shared identities but exactly to hold identities more lightly. David (2019, 6) further argues that during the course of the dialogue meetings, participants move from the “I” to the ‘we,’” very literally by ceasing to say “I” about their experiences and talking more about the experiences and perceptions of, for example, the Israelis as a group.

Just as it is pivotal to carve out space for continuing conflict after a peace agreement, post-agreement societies and institutions must be constituted relatively dynamic to avoid cementing identities and positions. This can be very difficult. For example, the Northern Ireland Assembly is a valuable platform for power sharing and continuing conflict by political means after the 1998 peace agreement. Yet it also risks freezing the conflict (Wilson 2010) in a particular agonistic relationship through its demand for Assembly Members to “designate their political identities as either ‘unionist, nationalist or other’” (McQuaid 2019, 151). Moreover, the interaction in the governing body of the Northern Ireland Assembly attains a theatrical dimension, where the two biggest parties representing the respective conflicting parties (Democratic Unionist Party—DUP and Sinn Féin) perform the role of opposition while at the same time supporting each other because they are forced into government by the power-sharing agreement (Bramsen 2022a). This performance could be seen in the act of clapping when the speaker is elected at the 2020 opening session of the Assembly referred to in the section on shared laughter above. When a speaker from Sinn Féin is elected, none of the DUP members clap, even though they were actually the ones suggesting and supporting him as a speaker against the will of the rest of the Assembly. A video of the meeting displays how Foster (DUP) and Weir (DUP) simultaneously move their hands and arms from the table to their lap presumably to avoid the urge to follow the rest of the crowd (Image 5.4), who clap for the full 10 seconds it takes for Maskey to move from his chair among the other members of the Assembly to the speaker’s lectern (YouTube 2020b). Avoiding clapping while others are clapping is not only symbolically meaningful but also micro-sociologically difficult, as it goes against the flow of the ritual being performed by everyone else.

Hence, dialogue efforts and post-agreement power-sharing arrangements alike risk cementing opposing identities in a theater of opposition (Bramsen 2022a) or “role-playing” of identities (David 2020).





**Image 5.4** DUP support Maskey as speaker yet deliberately resist clapping as he is elected<sup>12</sup>

### **Micro-processes and Infrastructure for Peace**

One of the areas where most people-to-people efforts have been taking place is in Israel and Palestine. Maoz (2011) has carried out public opinion surveys revealing that 16 percent of the Israeli population at the time had participated in at least one organized encounter with Palestinians in their lifetime. While many of these efforts have generated “excitement and feeling of collective effervescence” (David 2019, 10) they have not produced any significant change in the Israel–Palestine conflict. On the contrary, the conflict has only become more rigid, intractable, and protracted over the years. One of the problems often highlighted with civil society dialogue is that while it may build relations and social bonds between participants, it also risks normalizing the unequal power relations if not followed up by structural change (Barakat and Goldenblatt 2012).

In Israel–Palestine, this is sometimes referred to as “humus meetings,” meaning that Israelis and Palestinians come together and recognize that they are all human beings and that they all share a love for humus, but that this may not translate into a greater respect for other

<sup>12</sup> The image is reproduced with the permission of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission.



Palestinians and Israelis than those actually taking part in the exercise, and as they return to their ordinary environment, whatever transformation occurs in the people-to-people meetings is likely to vanish. This raises questions regarding the long-term impact of dialogue efforts. Describing his efforts with youth dialogue, one Palestinian moderator explains how

the problem was it had no continuity. It's hard to keep in touch, hundreds of kilometers away. We moderators tried to keep in touch, to come to the schools, to do simulation games, whatever. But then one father says something to his daughter about one of us being "a dirty Arab," and that spoils everything. (Rabinowitz 2001, 71)

Hence, if the larger infrastructure making up and sustaining the conflict is not transformed, people-to-people meetings may have very limited long-term effect.

Since the social bonds generated in conflict transformation meetings often evaporate or are experienced as a one-off case (e.g., where Israelis transform their relationship with one Palestinian but still consider the remaining Palestinians enemies), it is essential for conflict transformation efforts in intergroup or international conflicts to not only imply sporadic dialogue sessions but to promote sustained dialogue (Saunders 2012) that is followed up and maybe even sustained by networks of dialogue. Bryn describes how he deliberately often invites friends of people who have attended dialogue meetings to the next meeting, so as to promote a dialogical approach not just in particular individuals but between larger networks. As described by Mac Ginty (2022b, 218), elements of "people-to-people"-founded peace can spread horizontally, where people can "inspire others to show sociality, reciprocity, and even solidarity to those from an out-group." The connection generated in micro-dialogical encounters can also be circulated by actors engaging in powerful reconciliatory meetings traveling around and telling their respective stories about the transformation of their relationships. As described in Chapter 1, certain nodal points, such as key events or key interactions, can come to hold symbolic weight and form larger patterns of interaction. Like Jo Berry and Patrick Magee from Northern Ireland, several actors from diverse conflict situations across the globe travel around in their respective conflict-affected areas (and beyond) to share their experience of

overcoming enmity hence potentially making their initial reconciliatory meeting contagious<sup>13</sup> (e.g., Brown 2015).

Besides multiplying the effects of dialogue and reconciliation meetings, it is essential to transform the unequal power structures and practices of structural violence and to build a larger infrastructure capable of sustaining the change produced in dialogical encounters. As argued by David (2019, 11), “for micro-solidarity to be effective in a broader community, it has to be widely supported by the existing infrastructure.” In peace research and practice, such infrastructure is referred to as “infrastructure of peace.” The idea of peace infrastructure is to build infrastructure that can transform the ability of the wider society to respond to conflict and “develop mechanisms for cooperation among all relevant stakeholders, including the government, by promoting cooperative problem-solving and institutionalizing a response mechanism to violent conflict” (Hopp-Nishanka 2013, 2). Among other things, this would imply building institutions like schools and infrastructure like housing and bridges, which would allow cross-community contact, like the Peace Bridge in Derry in Northern Ireland. From a micro-sociological perspective, infrastructure for peace is not something over and above interactions but rather systematized change across a larger web of interactions. At the end of the day, peace consists of multiple interactions of non-enmity that are “enacted and embodied” (Mac Ginty 2021, 218).

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the micro-sociological approach can shed light on various aspects of conflict transformation, from the transformative potential of friendly interaction, rituals of reconciliation, and humor to how conflict transformation and dialogue efforts can also end up reenforcing unequal power-dynamics and cement otherness. The main contribution of the micro-sociological approach to conflict transformation is the eye for concrete, dynamic, and ritualized interaction between conflict parties and mediators and how this can be transformed from violent and antagonistic to friendly, agonistic, or

<sup>13</sup> The meeting between Berry and Magee was also circulated to the broader public through a documentary that was made about the meeting in 2001 by BBC, “Facing the Enemy.”

disengaged. However, such dialogical encounters may also be characterized by one party dominating the other, which can then reenforce and reproduce the power-dynamics characterizing the conflict and, hence, not have a transformative impact on the conflict.

Moreover, people-to-people encounters and institutions that enable political dialogue may ultimately cement opposing identities and otherness – again with limited transformative effects – although as in the case of Northern Ireland, it not only cements opposing identity formations but also softens up attitudes with more laughter and joviality than immediately after the peace agreement was signed in 1998. Even in the many cases where people-to-people activities and dialogue sessions transform enmity, energize participants, and generate social bonds across conflict divides, such meetings may end up having limited effect if they are not sustained by the structures that shape the remaining everyday experiences of participants and the larger web of interactions making up the conflict. Hence, developing infrastructure for peace and dialogue networks can be a critical part of conflict transformation.