

---

# *In Theory*

## The Role of Play and Humor in Creative Conflict Management

*Marianella Sclavi*

---

*In this article, I draw on the theories of three scholars whose works have not typically been part of the negotiation and conflict resolution canon (Arthur Koestler, Edward T. Hall, and Gregory Bateson) to develop the beginnings of a new model for creative and constructive conflict transformation that features playfulness and humor as its key components. I explore the connections between Koestler's theory of bisociation in the act of creation, Hall's ideas about the cultural construction of emotional responses, and Bateson's theories about the role of play and humor in human communication. All three authors focused particularly on body language and on the cognitive impact of emotions. Drawing on their theories and the connections between them, I suggest the theoretical underpinnings of a model for approaching conflict in which displacements and surprises, playfulness, humor, and "punch lines" can serve to reframe issues and open up new avenues for consensus building and resolution.*

---

**Key words:** conflict resolution, bisociation, displacement, body language, cultural construction of emotions, play, humor, wisdom, conflict transformation.

---

**Marianella Sclavi** is a sociologist and a facilitator of consensus building processes. She teaches at the Polytechnic University in Milan. Her e-mail address is [sclavi.marianella@gmail.com](mailto:sclavi.marianella@gmail.com).

---

## Introduction

Few dichotomies seem to be so deeply taken for granted in the Western world as the opposition between “playfulness,” on the one hand, and “seriousness,” on the other. This dichotomy — which I will argue is deeply misleading — pits playfulness as superficial and/or childish in opposition to seriousness as more productive and often goes hand in hand with the ideas that humor serves recreational purposes only and that the exercise of creativity is whimsical and unruly, the domain of “temperamental artists” and “mad scientists.”

In this article, I will critique and challenge these stereotypes in the context of conflict management. I argue that in today’s world, a conscious and reasoned adoption of playful attitudes, as well as the systematic use of creative responses, can help negotiators, mediators, facilitators, and other “third parties” build common ground and transform conflict, which is what humor has always sought to do.

Based on my experiences as a teacher and a consensus-building facilitator in conflict-ridden settings, I believe, as do many other practitioners (see Forester 2004), that humor, creativity, and invention follow precise general patterns that occur much more frequently than we realize and that applying such knowledge in appropriate situations can help us escape vicious cycles of miscommunication and conflict (Sclavi 2003).

In this article, I will draw on the convergent and complementary ideas of three eclectic twentieth-century thinkers — Arthur Koestler, Edward Hall, and Gregory Bateson — who are not typically studied in negotiation circles but who have produced valuable insights about how people become caught up in interactions in which key issues are off-limits for discussion, and how they can transform these mishaps into bridge-building processes. From this analysis, I will seek to outline a theory that explains why and how playfulness and humor can enhance “double-loop learning” (Argyris and Schön 1996), a process that I believe lies at the heart of creative conflict transformation. (Double-loop learning is a learning process in which the governing variables, the values and assumptions that underlie our understanding, are themselves considered and questioned.)

### Arthur Koestler: The Creative Act and Bisociation

I have coined the term *bisociation* in order to make a distinction between the routine skills of thinking on a single “plane,” as it were, and the creative act, which always operates on more than one plane (Koestler 1964: 35–36).

The novelist and philosopher Arthur Koestler in his book *The Act of Creation* (1964) advances the theory that all creative activities — the conscious and unconscious processes of scientific discovery, artistic

---

originality, and comic inspiration in everyday life — arise from some sort of systematic training in looking for possibilities that are “at the same time impossible and perfectly logical, but of a logic not usually applied to that particular type of situation” (Koestler 1964: 35). In real and contingent situations, all acts of creation in any field have a basic pattern in common, a “bisociation pattern,” which is a way of exploring and inventing multiple perspectives (which are surprising, unexpected, may seem absurd, and out of control) not in artificial settings, like the brainstorming ones, but in real-life situations that require one to be able to “swim against the tide.”

Koestler describes “the pendulum experiment” that the psychologist Carl Duncker performed on his students. “In this experiment,” Koestler wrote, “the subject was led to a table on which had been placed among miscellaneous objects, a cord with a pendulum-weight attached to its end and a nail. All he was asked to do was to drive the nail into the wall and hang the cord with the pendulum-weight on the nail, but no hammer was provided. Only fifty per cent of the students found the solution: to use the pendulum-weight as a hammer.” This experiment, Koestler wrote, illustrates “the stubborn coherence of the perceptual frames and matrices of thought in our minds. The visual gestalt of weight-attached to cord, plus the verbal suggestion of their venerated teacher, made the pendulum weight stick to its matrix like an insect caught in amber” (Koestler 1964: 189–190).

The “stubborn coherence of perceptual frames” is absolutely central to Koestler’s theory of bisociation, which he represents pictorially as the partial overlapping of two ovals with the object or situation to be seen on more than one plane inscribed in the overlapping space. In one oval (called alternatively “plane of thought and vision,” “frame,” “field,” “perceptual-evaluative-matrix”), the pendulum weight is seen uniquely as the pendulum; in the other oval it is seen as a hammer. What it takes to see both ovals as “true” or legitimate in a specific and contingent situation is an intrinsic part of Koestler’s bisociation theory.

The following anecdote illustrates well, I believe, how the bisociation pattern provides a fitting paradigm for basic communication patterns in creative conflict transformation and what humor has to do with it. It is known as the story of the wise judge. Two litigants bring their case before a judge who listens carefully to the first litigant before delivering his verdict: “You are right.” He then listens to the second with equal care and pronounces: “You are right.” But a member of the audience stands up and asks, “Your honor, how can they both be right?” The judge pauses for a moment before responding, “And you too are right.”

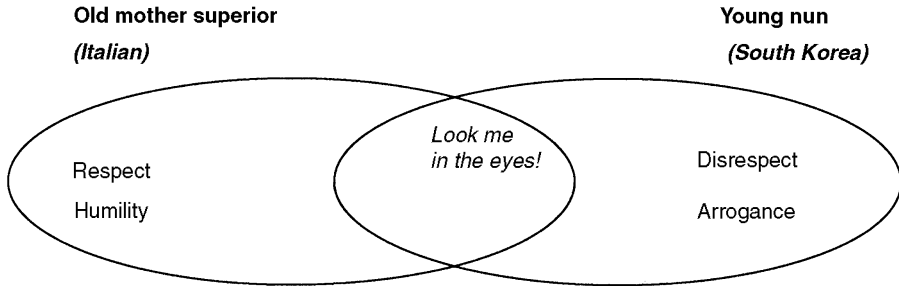
This story, I believe, powerfully illustrates the usefulness of the bisociation pattern in listening and in creative conflict transformation. I will also illustrate its application through two stories of my own experiences.

---

**Figure One**  
**Bisociation Map for the Young Nun's Story**

---

**Bisociation-map 1: "Look me in the eyes!" Italy/South Korea**



---

***A Nun's Story***

A few years ago in Milan, a young student of mine in a course on intercultural communications, a South Korean nun, described a stressful personal situation. Her elderly Italian mother superior repeatedly demanded that the young nun face her and look her straight in the eyes. But in Korean culture it is considered a sign of extreme disrespect for a young person, especially a woman, to look straight into the eyes of an older person. The young nun avoided doing as ordered, which irritated the mother superior and made her suspicious. I asked my student why she did not just explain her discomfort to the mother superior, but she told me that to do so would embarrass her even more: in a conflict, a young woman cannot have the "last word" and cannot tell an elder that she should "know better." Figure One above illustrates this story with a bisociation map.

Both the nun and the mother superior find themselves in a "double-bind" (see Bateson 1972, 1976): both feel that they will be punished whatever they do, the young nun if she does look the mother superior in the eyes or if she does not, the mother superior if she demands that behavior or if she does not because in both cases her authority will be hurt. Moreover, they both believe that it is out of the question to openly comment on this situation.

***The Champagne Toast***

Here is another story. In the 1980s, I attended a birthday party in New York state in honor of a woman from Russia, who was visiting the United States on a teachers' exchange program. The table was set with flowers, fruits, snacks, and various nonalcoholic drinks. The Russian woman seemed

---

pleased and announced that she would open a bottle of champagne that she had brought from Russia to celebrate her arrival in the U.S.

But as the moment of the toast approached, her mood darkened. I asked her what was wrong. She took me into the kitchen and opened a cupboard full of crystal glasses. She said, "Look what they have in this house and they want us to drink champagne in paper cups!" I told her that the paper cups were there for the nonalcoholic drinks; the champagne had been a surprise. I left to speak with the hostess to inform her that our guest would appreciate crystal glasses for the champagne. She shook her head, explaining that those glasses had not been used for years; they would need to be hand washed one by one. We drank our toast, but the mood of the party seemed spoiled. This conflict can be represented with a bisociation map as shown in Figure Two.

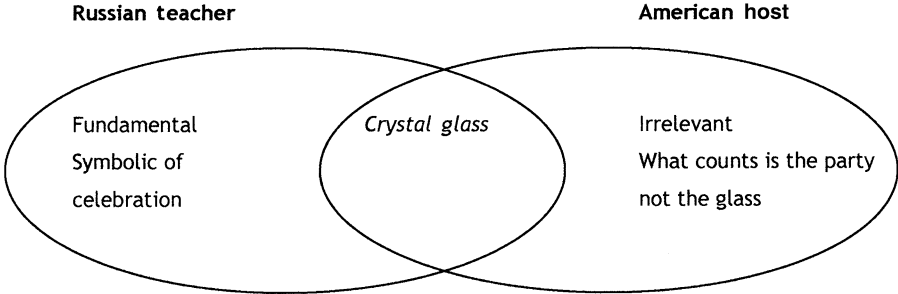
The alternative dispute resolution literature is full of stories that illustrate how conflicts can escalate when what one party sees as irrelevant and marginal, the other considers of utmost importance and vice versa. In this story of the champagne toast, we can see that none of the parties were able to shift their frame, that "meta-communication" (communicating about communication) does not mean only "telling something openly" (which I did when I communicated the teacher's unhappiness to the hostess) and that none of us was ready for the drastic personal and relational "displacement" that might have helped us to handle this situation more successfully (Wheeler 2004), which I believe using humor might have enabled us to do. Developing a sensitivity for "punch lines" as a building block of good stories

---

**Figure Two**  
**Bisociation Map for the Champagne Toast Story**

---

**Bisociation-map 2: "Crystal glass" Russia/USA**



---

and sharing these stories and reflecting on them can, I believe, help us build bridges and more effectively manage conflict.

### **Edward Hall: Tales of Cross-Cultural Incomprehension**

The global, multicultural world in which we live today — much more so than when Koestler wrote his book in the early 1960s — continuously demands that we break free from habitual thinking. We frequently have to deal with what negotiation scholars Max Bazerman and Michael Watkins (2004) refer to as “expected unexpectedness.” To merely avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings or simply forget about them after they occur is to miss opportunities to grow and acquire leadership abilities.

During one of his first stays in Japan, Edward T. Hall, an American ethnologist, “found himself involved in a series of events that left him confused and disoriented,” events that he described in detail in his book *Beyond Culture* (1976). He wrote that some of his experiences in Japan “completely mystified me, and only later did I learn how an overt act seen from the vantage point of one’s culture can have an entirely different meaning when looked at in the context of the foreign culture” (Hall 1976: 58).

Hall had been staying at a hotel in Tokyo for about ten days when he returned to his room in the middle of the day to find someone else’s things scattered about. He thought he had entered the wrong room. “My first thoughts were, ‘What if I am discovered here? How do I explain my presence to a Japanese who may not even speak English?’ I was close to panic . . . ” (Hall 1976: 58-59).

He checked his key to verify that this was, indeed, his room. “Clearly they had moved somebody else into my room,” he wrote. “Baffled and mystified, I took the elevator to the lobby. Why hadn’t they told me at the desk, instead of letting me risk embarrassment and loss of face by being caught in somebody else’s room? Why had they moved me in the first place? It was a nice room and . . . I was loath to give it up. . . . Nothing made sense” (Hall 1976: 59).

The desk clerk explained that Hall had indeed been moved because his particular room had been reserved in advance by another guest. The clerk gave him the key for his new room, where he discovered that his luggage, clothing, toiletries, etc. had been “distributed around the new room almost as though I had done it myself. . . . How could somebody else do all those hundred-and-one little things just the way I did?” (Hall 1976: 59).

Three days later they changed his room again, and then once more again. He was more prepared the second time and decided to behave as if he thought this was normal practice, and each time he returned to his hotel, he asked the desk clerk if he was still in the same room. But he had stayed at a different hotel in Japan previously and nothing like this had happened. Why, he wondered? Was he the victim of some form of discrimination against foreigners?

---

Later, he went with some friends on a visit to Kyoto, where they stayed in a small country inn on a hillside. They returned one night to find that they had been moved — but this time not to another room, but to another hotel!

“Again, what a blow!” Hall writes. “Without warning. We wondered what the new hotel would be like. And with our descent into the town, our hearts sank further. Finally, when we could descend no more, the taxi took off into a part of the city we had not seen before. No Europeans here. The streets got narrower and narrower until we turned into a side street that could barely accommodate the tiny Japanese taxi into which we were squeezed. Clearly, this was a hotel of another class. I found that, by then, I was getting a little paranoid — which is easy enough to do in a foreign land — and said to myself, ‘They must think we are very low status people, indeed, to treat us this way.’ As it turned out, the neighborhood, in fact, the whole district, showed us an entirely different side of life from what we had seen before — much more interesting and authentic. True, we did have some communication problems because no one was used to dealing with foreigners. But few of them were serious. Yet, the whole matter of being moved like a piece of derelict luggage puzzled me” (Hall 1976: 60–61).

A Japanese friend later explained to Hall how expectations of hotel guests differ in Japan than in the West. During their stay, hotel guests are considered to be family members, and in a family the older members get the best room and the younger members are not expected to “stand on ceremony.” To be treated this way is seen to confer status on the guest, not reduce it. Hall’s friend told him that he had actually received a great honor by being moved! Large, luxury hotels that cater to Americans, the kind that Hall had stayed in on a previous visit, treat their guests more formally, because, as Hall notes, “Americans don’t like to be moved around; it makes them anxious” (Hall 1976: 64–65). Figure Three is a “bisociation map” that illustrates this story.

In the United States, to move a hotel guest without even telling him or her would be perceived as an insult, an indication that the guest’s concerns are not being considered. If a guest were moved from a larger or nicer room to a smaller one with fewer amenities, it could also be seen as reflecting a loss of status. Space — office space, for example — can be seen as an important indicator of status, especially in the American workplace.

### ***Competing Narratives***

Hall’s story of his experiences in Japanese hotels can be taken as the starting point to illustrate several different kinds of narratives that can characterize stories of cross-cultural misunderstanding. These include

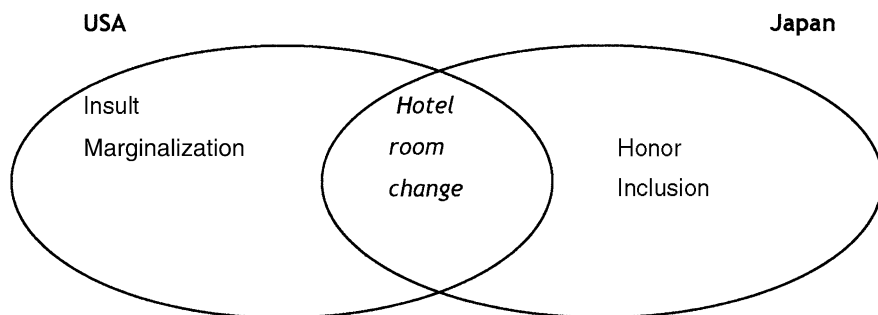
1. multiple-frame narrations, in which the characters succeed in treating opposite and conflicting frames as equally legitimate;

---

**Figure Three**  
**Bisociation Map for the Japanese Hotel Story**

---

**Bisociation-map 3: “Hotel, room change,” USA/Japan**



- 
2. one-frame narrations, in which the very existence of a different frame is denied because the only valid, universal one is ours; and
  3. no-frame narrations, in which a special effort is made to report only “the facts,” with no evaluative content whatsoever — although the “facts” can indeed have many different and opposing meanings and interpretations, depending on the context (Schön and Rein 1994).

Hall’s telling of his tale falls under the first category. He uses the incident as a cognitive resource, an opportunity to explore other possible interpretations. He affirms the legitimacy of the subjective experience of both the Western hotel guest and the Japanese hotel managers without denying the inherent paradox. “I did have to put up a strong fight with myself to keep from interpreting what was going on as though the Japanese were the same as I,” Hall wrote (1976: 63).

Compare his narration with one that seems more common: “These Japanese do not know how to treat their guests in their hotels. They move you to a different room whenever they want without even warning you! I do not know if they are racist toward Americans, but they certainly behave as if they were!” In this type of account, the protagonist admits that he is the victim of an embarrassing incident, but that is secondary to his verdict of what is true and what is false, who is right and who is wrong. The one-frame story has the enormous advantage of being incomparably more concise, a feature that is valued in our busy, time-pressed world.

A version of the third type of narration might go as follows: “They move you from one room to another in Japanese hotels without any



---

warning; however to make up for it they not only move your luggage but they also place your things in the wardrobe and in the bathroom exactly as you would do it yourself.” The narrator here seeks to inform without making value judgments. To demonstrate his neutrality, he is careful to balance negative and positive aspects; he sticks to the facts. But such a narration fails to transmit any personal experience of the incident or the different meanings that the same facts might have for individuals of different cultural backgrounds.

So we have these three versions of the same event in which the upsetting aspects of the event and the emotions they provoked are treated in different ways: in the first style of narration, they are valued for the way they help the narrator to adjust his frame; in the second, they become the material for a defensive-offensive reaction; and in the third, they are totally ignored.

### ***Emotions, Facts, and Details***

Hall interpreted the disorientation, dismay, and irritation that he felt in the Japanese hotels as clues that perhaps his habitual frames were not working in that context. His sense of outrage, offense, and rage gave him insight as to how he, an American, saw and reacted to such a situation. In his analysis, Hall neither renounced his own point of view nor assumed it as the only one possible; rather, he looked for a bisociation-style explanation as a first step toward a solution of the puzzle.

We could say that he replaced ethnocentric bias with what the economist Albert Hirschman (1971) has called the “bias toward hope.” He is guided by an expectation of future agreement, looks for clues to explain how these same circumstances can be interpreted differently, and treats the other parties as colleagues in this effort to achieve understanding and reciprocal learning. This process depends on and helps to build trust.

The emotions involved in such an effort are not obstacles but rather indispensable instruments. One’s awareness that “interpreting” an incident is equivalent to structuring a frame allows us to consider precisely *those details that do not fit the frame*. A useful exercise is to read Hall’s original story and underline the words and phrases that refer to apparently marginal details and consider why they were included.

Such details can be classified into two groups: those that signify absence and those that signify excess. An example of the first involves the idea that his hosts have insulted Hall by moving his room. But then, would he not see signs of disrespect or of scorn rather than perceiving an attitude of embarrassed respect? Even their failure to provide an explanation is not accompanied by arrogance.

The second type of clue is found in the extraordinary care the innkeepers took to place Hall’s things in his new room just as he had them in the old room. Here again, if it was an insult then why did they not just throw everything into his suitcase and leave it to him to sort his things out?

---

Like the “stick to the facts” or no-frame approach, the multiple-frames approach requires balance, but the dynamics are different. The neutral, nonpartisan approach favored by many social scientists would classify value judgments and emotional responses as merely subjective. An epistemology of active listening and creative conflict transformation, on the contrary, suggests involvement *and* detachment *and* displacement to reach the multiplication of frames, the exploration of other possible worlds and constructive meta-communication. I believe that without establishing this kind of narration — in everyday life as well as in the social sciences — one fails to fully recognize and respect the other person or party (Lutz 1988; Alison 1989; Bateson 1994).

## **Gregory Bateson: Play and Humor in Verbal and Nonverbal Language**

What are the relationships between emotions, body language, verbal language, and knowledge? In many of his writings, Gregory Bateson, a British-born naturalized American anthropologist who worked in many disciplinary fields, explored this very question.

“The central point which I want to make,” wrote Bateson (1963/1991: 127), “is that we have at the present time two scientific languages for the discussion of affect and, further, that these two languages are mutually translatable. The first is the beginning of a scientific language for describing the psychology of an individual. The second is the beginning of a language for describing relationships between individuals.” In the former, emotions are considered as “signals of state”; the wagging of a dog’s tail, for example, is seen as an external signal of the dog’s internal state. In the second, the tail wagging is seen as conveying information about the relationship between the dog and its owner. “The hypothesis that I intend to put forward,” Bateson (1963/1991: 127) wrote, “is that it becomes an affirmation or a proposal about what shall be the contingencies in that relationship.”

### ***The Formal Dynamics of Body Language***

The British novelist Samuel Butler once said that he had learned the most important things by closely watching his communication with his own cat. (For a description of the relationship between Butler’s work and Bateson’s, see Lipset [1980]). Bateson took this idea seriously. He wrote:

When I open the refrigerator door, the cat comes and rubs against my leg stating some variant of the proposition “meow.” To say that she is asking for milk may be correct, but it is not a literal translation from her language into ours. I suggest that more literally we should translate her message as “be mamma.” She is trying to define the contingencies of relationship. She is inviting me to accept those contingencies and to act in accordance with them. She may step down somewhat from this high abstract level by

---

indicating urgency — “be mamma *now*”; or she may achieve a certain concreteness by ostensive communication — “be mamma now *in regard to that jug*”; but, in its primary structure, her communication is archaic and highly abstract in the sense that its prime subject matter is always relationship (Bateson 1963/1991: 129).

And elsewhere:

The cat talks in terms of patterns and contingencies of relationship, and from this talk it is up to you to take the deductive step, guessing that it is milk that the cat wants. . . . What was extraordinary — the great new thing — in the evolution of human language was not the discovery of abstraction or generalization, but the discovery of how to be specific about something other than relationship (Bateson 1972: 367).

By observing *Naven*, a ceremonial ritual of the Iatmul tribe in New Guinea that involves transvestitism (Bateson 1936/1958), and later the interactions among various mammal species (cats, dogs, otters, monkeys, dolphins) and humans, Bateson arrived at the conclusion that those acts and signals that the analytical mind sees as mere gestures or signals of state are, in fact, a special and autonomous vocabulary that conveys its messages by acting as part of a pattern of relationship, as in the earlier description of how the kitten communicates.

While our verbal analytic code is linear and focused on the terms of the relationship, the nonverbal code is metaphoric and focused on relationships themselves; it lacks the precision of past and future tense and it is built as “a system in which the chains of cause and effect are circular or more complex than circular” (Bateson 1963/1991: 56). The organism (kitten) *communicates by doing*: the movements of her body in the space define the contingencies of the relationship. Relationships and not individual objects are the contents of this powerful language,<sup>1</sup> and the form by which it is built and conveyed is metonymical, with the parts calling forth and evoking whole “systems of contingency in the interchange” (Bateson 1991: 130). I propose to call this nonverbal mode of classification “strong metonymy” to underline its impact and importance. (See “strong objectivity,” a phrase coined by Sandra Harding [1993].)

### ***Play and Creative Conflict Transformation***

Bateson described examples of conflict transformation by mammals through play. One of these is the description of how a mother dog weans her puppies:

The mother presses the puppy down with her mouth open on the back of his neck. If after that the puppy again asks for milk,

---

he is again pressed down. So far the story is quite simply a story of operant conditioning with negative reinforcement. And it would fit any textbook of psychology. But the next step was a quasi-battle, which became an affectionate play between mother and puppy. The puppy attacked mother's mouth with its mouth and she and puppy then had a mutual mouthing game. In other words, the learning context is woven into a total relationship and does not stand out as a single incident. . . . And if dogs achieve that order of complexity, you may be pretty sure that human beings could and should achieve two or three orders of greater complexity (Bateson 1963/1991: 312).

During the 1950s, Bateson directed a team of researchers looking at the role of abstraction in human communication. The team examined such areas as communication in the contexts of psychotherapy, theater, humor, and Zen Buddhist philosophy. One of the researchers, William Fry, specialized in the dynamics of humor and pursued his research in close collaboration with Bateson. In 1963 he published his results in a book called *Sweet Madness: A Study of Humor* (1963/1968). The two questions at the center of Fry's study were: What is necessary for play to be playful? What is necessary for humor to be humorous?

According to Fry, the "play" frame is constituted with physical cues. A verbal suggestion to play (e.g., someone says "Let's play!") would not work unless it is accompanied by appropriate physical, nonverbal cues; words alone are not enough to establish the "play frame" (Fry 1963/1968). The appropriate nonverbal cues are the postures and tone of voice of an actor who is already playing, while the wrong ones are those connected with, for example, a menacing or robotic or bored tone of voice, attitude, and posture.

The nonverbal message that "this is play," when actually translated into words, Bateson wrote, turns out to be analogous to the liar's paradox: "I am lying." If the speaker *is* lying then he *is not* lying with that statement, but if he in fact *was not* lying, then that statement constitutes a lie, creating an infinite, circular paradox. The "this is play" nonverbal message establishing the entire interaction as unreal creates a confusion: are the unreal acts that compose it "real" or "unreal?" To amuse himself when he plays war, a kid must pretend that it is real war and also be absolutely certain that it is not, in a continuous swinging between these two certainties. Play would not be "playful" if it were not for this kind of circular paradox. Fry (1963/1968: 134) wrote that " 'Let's play' creates a frame around a particular series of episodes which are thus both actual and unreal."

### ***The Architecture of Humor between Verbal and Nonverbal***

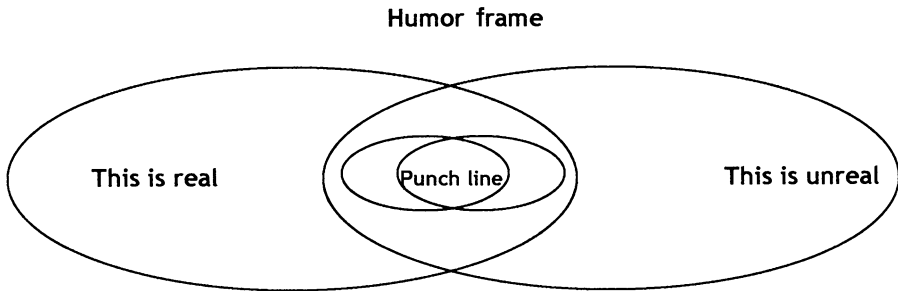
Establishing a play frame promotes a congenial atmosphere of happiness, lightness, even laughter. In addition to the play frame, however, humor also requires a story and a "punch line," a climax to the story that features an unexpected and incongruous reversal, a displacement. The process of

---

**Figure Four**  
**A Bisociation Map for the Structure of Humor**

---

**Bisociation-map 4: *Humor as a punch line into a play frame***



---

telling a joke, for example, comprises the following basic features: teller and listeners become involved in a story with an apparently obvious interpretation, but they know that at some point an unexpected shift in the story will occur — this is the punch line. But a story that features an incongruous surprise is not by itself funny without an accompanying play frame. According to Fry, most studies of humor neglected or ignored the fundamental importance of the encompassing play frame.

The punch line is integral to the ongoing process of the joke, upsetting the content of the story and displacing the listeners and even the tellers who laugh because they are part of a “This is play” (real and unreal) frame. In Figure Four, I have used a double helix to illustrate the structure of humor, again relying on Koestler’s bisociation model.<sup>2</sup>

Humor is a complex form that allows us to investigate the dynamics of change and resistance to change, as well as identity, authority, belonging, power, and imagination. It challenges our frames and enables us to explore the unexpected in creative ways, to see with different eyes the things we do (or do not do) when we react to tensions and conflicts with a merely linear behavior of defense–offense, and thus it offers opportunities for more creative conflict resolution.

### **Conflict Transformation and Humor**

Let us consider a scenario in which Person B finds Person A’s behavior to be offensive, insulting, and irritating. According to conventional (analytic and verbal) thinking, Person B has three options. She can react in a *symmetrical-adversarial* way (tit-for-tat), in a *complementary-adversarial* way by asserting her victimization, or by trying to *avoid the conflict* and withdrawing from the relationship.

---

Using our three authors' theories and looking at this scenario from the point of view of the metonymic code of nonverbal communication (where each action is also a reaction and at the same time a proposal), one could read Person A's behavior as a statement that "I am your adversary; be my adversary." Person B could respond by behaving in an adversarial fashion herself, but by doing so, she would accept and legitimize Person A's adversarial proposition and accept his definition of their relationship and its contingencies.

If Person B were to take a bisociation approach to this situation, she might see how the usual responses (fight back, claim victimization, withdraw) rely on both adversarial and collaborative interpretations. They are adversarial from the standpoint of Person B's *reaction* to Person A's *action*, but are collaborative in that by choosing any one of these options, Person B will have accepted Person A's version of their relationship. What can B do to avoid collaborating and accepting A's frame?

The answer, I believe, is displacement. The only way to resist collaboration is to refuse to dance to the other party's tune by dancing to one's own tune (see Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson 1967). This move actually requires a "double displacement" because Person B must displace her automatic defensive-offensive reaction and engage in behaviors that in that moment she views as both awkward and nonsensical and that Person A will view as unexpected (see Ury 1991; Donohue 2004). From an emotional standpoint, this requires a special sensitivity for dissonance, for moves and situations that sound out of tune, but which are interesting precisely for that reason (Kolb and Williams 2003). Taking such an approach is never easy, but it becomes easier when I fully understand that a defensive-offensive reaction is a collaboration (and *I do not want* to collaborate) and that the other person cannot perform his dance of conflict *without* my collaboration.

This "double displacement" is also a double bisociation: a "punch in the nose" will be read as "offensive" on one side of the bisociation map and as "collaboration" on the opposite side, while a nonsensical reaction like "expressing solidarity to the offender" can be seen at the same time as crazy and humiliating and as a counterintuitive move, the first step of a new dance that opens up new possibilities.

The critical knot here, for my argument, is that the fundamental dynamic in listening and telling a joke (its conversational pattern) corresponds perfectly to the creative treatment of double displacement and bisociation in positive conflict transformation. In the book *An Italian Lady Goes to the Bronx* (Sclavi 2007), I illustrated the transformation of "double displacement" into a "double illumination" in humor with the following example:

Let's take that famous quip by Mark Twain: "It's not true that it's hard to stop smoking; I stop every day." That "every day" suddenly reverses the meaning, which at first we give to the verb "to stop,"

---

undercutting our expectations — or out-maneuvering our expectations — and it therefore makes us laugh . . . (Sclavi 2007: 291).

In an essay on wit, Sigmund Freud identified three different phases in the interpretation of a joke. They are “(1) bewilderment and annoyance in the face of a verbal construct that appears to be flawed, out of place, and to make no sense; (2) illumination, with the understanding of another possible interpretation that we had not considered; and (3) a second illumination in the form of the recognition that a minor detail was able to take us in” (Sclavi 2007: 291-292).

Humor, I further believe, requires that a person laughs first of all at himself. Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that “humor is not a mood, but a way of looking at the world.” It is a question of growing aware of a broader field of possible points of view. But we cannot accept a different perspective if we do not relinquish the certainties of the way in which we commonly view events. And to do so we have to be able to take a humorous view of ourselves (Sclavi 2007: 291-292).

A humor-based style of observation and self-reflection opens our minds to matrices of perception and evaluation that conflict with the ones we take for granted. Attitudes of unimpeachable seriousness lead us to cling to our original perceptions. They deafen us to “other possible worlds” of dialogue. The art of listening, which is the heart of any positive conflict transformation, can be described as the ability to deal with daily life by shifting through the same succession of attitudes that mark our response to a joke.

I close this article with two stories: one of unresolved conflict and one of successful consensus building. I believe that stories of failures, and particularly of personal failures in conflict transformation, can be just as instructive as stories of success.

Mary Parker Follett, an early twentieth-century scholar of organizational behavior and conflict management, wrote that “concepts can never be presented to me merely, they must be knotted into the structure of my being, and this can be done only through my own activity” (Davis 2000: 69). Similarly, what persuades me of the soundness of an approach is the fact that I can apply it in my own life. For example, I believe that had I understood these concepts years ago, I could have behaved differently in my relationship with my mother-in-law.

### ***A Mother-in-Law Story***

What I now understand is that when I married the oldest of three sons from a family that was much more traditional than my own, I felt under attack for not living up to traditional expectations of how an Italian wife should behave. My mother-in-law clearly wanted to make me feel part of the family and one of the ways she did so was to give me expensive gifts. On one

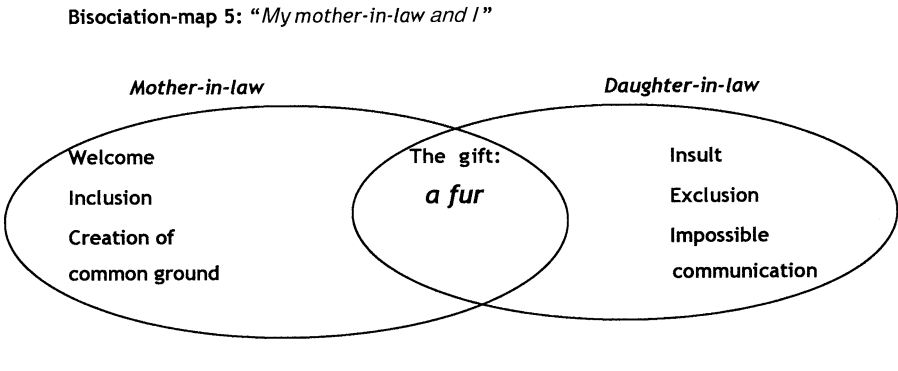


occasion, my husband and I arrived at his parents' country house to find a fur coat waiting for me. I rebelled against the image of "*la signora con pelliccia*" (the lady with a fur) and reacted angrily. I felt misunderstood, not accepted, and insulted that I had not been consulted beforehand. To me, the fur said, "You are not the type of woman we want for our son" and "You must change and wear this fur." I put the coat in a closet, never wore it, and acted as if it did not exist. I never said a word about it. The relationship between my mother-in-law and me was generally formal and well mannered but lacked any real affection. Now I regret this. I should have known better, but it is too late because she died ten years ago.

I have drawn a bisociation map to diagram the story of my mother-in-law and me and the fur coat. (See Figure Five.) At the overlapping center is the gift of the fur coat. On the mother-in-law side of the map, the gift signals "welcome, inclusion, construction of common ground," but on the daughter-in-law side we read "insult, exclusion, impossible communication."

What I find most interesting about this story is that I knew that my mother-in-law meant well, that she meant to welcome me, include me, and was trying to find common ground. I knew that the same things had different and opposite meanings for the two of us, and that from our respective points of view we were both "right." At the same time I feared that by playing the game by her rules, by accepting her invitation to be included, I would find myself trapped, which would alter my sense of myself and affect my future choices in a way that I did not like. Simply explaining that I did not wear furs but that I appreciated the intention of the gift seemed like it would have been beside the point. Only after her death did I understand what I should have done.

**Figure Five**  
**Bisociation Map for Mother-in-Law's Gift**





---

What I think now is that the real trap was epistemological: I did not understand the moral of Edward T. Hall's story of the Japanese hotels. I interpreted my anger and dissatisfaction only through a single frame; I could not see my interaction with my mother-in-law through multiple frames. I was unable to make the shift toward seeing my mother-in-law in a different way, toward feeling solidarity and building an alliance with this strong, courageous, self-effacing woman who was herself a prisoner of the traditions I sought to escape. But how could I find the courage to do something that I did not know could be done? I lived in a world of bounded rationality and limited possibilities.

And now I think back on situations that were already friendly and merry enough, some involving my children, in which I could have introduced a generous "punch line." Only later could I develop an epistemology of emotions as the material of which multiple frames are made. I had a sense of humor, even then, but had not mastered a humor-based approach to conflict transformation.

### ***Consensus Building in the Colorado AIDS/HIV experience***

In 1994, mediator Mike Hughes facilitated a series of large public meetings in Colorado with the goal of building consensus on HIV prevention strategies to be financed with Federal money administered through the Colorado Department of Health. The ethnically and socioeconomically diverse group of participants (varying from a maximum of 110 to a minimum of 60) met over an eight-month period and comprised public health officials, gay rights activists, and Christian conservatives. It was taken for granted that issues would include ideological struggles concerning methods of prevention as well as conflicts over "turf" (who should receive money for and manage which initiatives). Figure Six diagrams the issues.

Hughes describes his general goals this way: "If this group was to be able to work together its members were going to have to embrace the group's larger mission. In developing a plan they would have to go behind their personal agendas." Participants, he wrote, "would have to shift from thinking 'I have to change your mind about this' and move toward 'Well, what words can we find together?'" (Hughes, Forester, and Weiser 1999: 1015-1016).

Hughes proposed ground rules (speaking one at a time, showing respect for each other, using appropriate language, respecting the right to disagree, etc.). He conducted a brief training segment on how to approach conflict productively and suggested ten specific guidelines in this area, all directly related to emotions and body language. They ranged from "Take care of yourself. Relax, breathe, and make yourself comfortable before tackling controversial issues" to "Everyone has a right to the way he or she feels. Work to accept other people's strong feelings as well as your own" (Hughes, Forester, and Weiser 1999: 1017).<sup>3</sup>

---

Nevertheless, some of the issues, such as the levels and forms of participation as well as cultural and moral issues, generated contention. For example, in the third meeting, some participants rebelled against the facilitator because the room was set up in such a way that all 110 participants faced in the same direction, theater style, and so the channels of communication were in the facilitator's hands. So, for the plenary-discussion ground rules, Hughes proposed to adopt what in the literature is called a "Samoan Circle" method:<sup>4</sup>

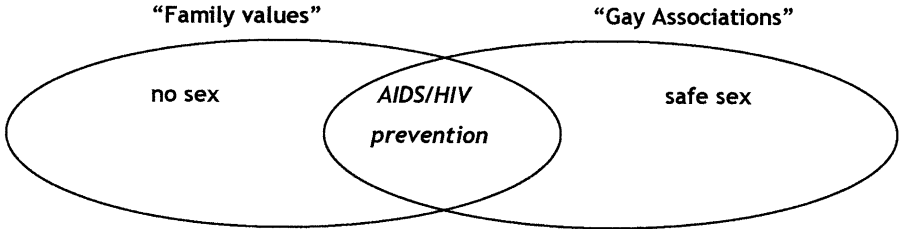
We moved the chairs into concentric circles with a small table and four chairs at the center. And we made aisles that led to the center of the room so everyone could easily move from back to the front. . . . With this set-up I could get out of the way and let people come to the table rather than waiting for me to call on them. . . . The procedure: when you are ready to open a discussion on a topic, we will clearly mark the transition "Now it is time for discussion." Then we [mediators] will get out of the way. If you've got something to say, come sit in a chair. There are four chairs and four of you can talk with one another — loudly, so we can all hear it. When you are done, get out of the chair. If you see somebody waiting, make room for them. . . . When we think that the discussion has wound itself to some sort of conclusion, or we want to ask if you have come to some consensus, we'll interject to move the process on. But when it's time to talk, it is time to talk. You do not have to be called on, you do not have to raise your hand (Hughes, Forester, and Weiser 1999: 1017).

---

**Figure Six**  
**Prevention Strategies in HIV/AIDS**

---

**Bisociation-map 6: *Prevention strategies in the AIDS/HIV case***



---

The participants, Hughes, Forester, and Weiser (1999: 1017) wrote, “loved it . . . both because the structure made sense and because they sensed our responsiveness. Through the remainder of the work, we used this system.”

Between two large group meetings, smaller group meetings comprising volunteers who had the mandate to articulate specific proposals took place. The small groups were able to compress the one-hundred-fifty needs statements into thirteen general statements.

During the plenary, a participant came to the Samoan circle and, in what might have been a major blow to the process said:

“Here is a need that is missing . . . to shift the discussion of AIDS in Colorado from a moral issue to a public health issue, and I refuse to participate in moving this plan forward until we wrestle with that.” He made an eloquent speech about how moral barriers to effective AIDS education were killing people. The discussion about sex and morality opened up by this participant’s intervention was personal, deeply felt, emotionally very powerful, but not personally aggressive, hateful, or verbally violent. The whole room was captivated. Other people ran to the table and started talking with him. The folks from Focus on the Family and from Colorado for Family Values talked about how for them this was a moral issue and the meaning their values had for them. People engaged in the discussion with renewed intensity. . . . Amazingly, no one broke the ground rules. People were speaking to one another respectfully. They were doing their best to listen to one another (Hughes, Forester, and Weiser 1999: 1020–1021).

Ethicist Daniel Markovits, in his commentary to the article, writes:

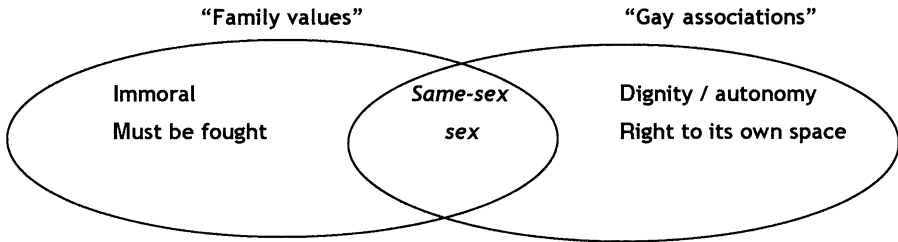
The important feature of values — that those who hold them want to apply them to people generally and not just to themselves — makes value conflict particularly resistant to consensus building. It renders ineffectual key tools in the consensus builder arsenal, tools that generally form the core of the consensus builder’s effort to resolve conflicts of interest. . . . In a value conflict each side understands sympathy and fairness through the lens of its own values, so these ideals can’t help resolve the conflict and build consensus because they are among the forces that drive the conflict. . . . And indeed this is precisely the problem Coloradans faced at the most delicate and critical points in the HIV/AIDS mediation. A member of the Colorado AIDS Project insisted the epidemic had to be understood as a public health problem and not as a moral issue because to do otherwise was to disrespect those who were dying of the disease or were already dead; a member of Colorado Family Values replied that the only way to properly respect the dying and to save others from similar deaths was to make AIDS a moral issue. Each side believed in being sympathetic and fair, but they couldn’t agree about what these ideas involved (Hughes, Forester, and Weiser 1999: 1022–1023).

---

**Figure Seven**  
**Value Conflicts in HIV/AIDS Prevention**

---

**Bisociation-map 7: Conflicts of value in the AIDS/HIV case**



Markovits says that this intervention demonstrates the impossibility of using sympathy and appeals to fairness as effective tools in deep value conflicts, Hughes says that this intervention made consensus possible. They are both right, and it is important to see how and why.

Figure Seven represents the conflict. Now, despite the doubts of many, the participants to this process came to consensus and jointly worked out a document that described needs, populations, and strategies. They proposed a ranking of populations lined up under the needs' statements and prioritized groups needing prevention services as highest, higher, and high. The opening statements of this document read as follows: "There is a need to remove moral objections to messages that are inappropriate to the target community" and "For communities that include a range of moral perspectives, HIV prevention methods need to be appropriate to that range of moral perspectives by presenting multiple prevention messages." I represent the essence of this final statement in Figure Eight.

How did the open expression of antagonistic moral visions aid the process instead of damaging it? I agree with Markovits that the ground rules about speech conventions, the guidelines related to interactions and body language, and the Samoan Circle were all effective tools but more was required. I argue that a humor- and play-based approach was relevant in this case. For example, Hughes wrote that "While facilitators ostensibly adopt neutral stances, I believe my emotional engagement with participants was critical" (Hughes, Forester, and Weiser 1999: 1028). And actually, his narration is full of insights showing that most of the participants were skilled at handling the emotional implications of the process. They knew how to be both serious and light, that the one requires the other.

On the serious side, tears were shed and there was much discussion of the need to listen compassionately. On the lighter side, the group used

---

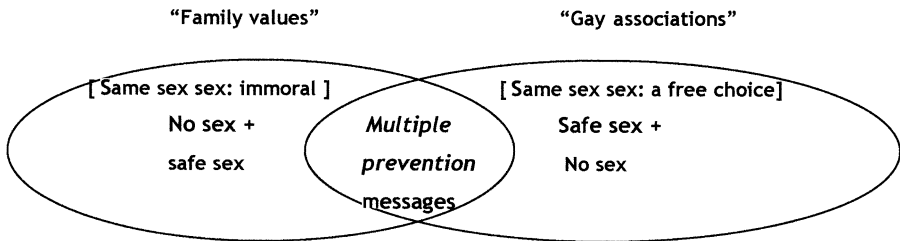


---

## Figure Eight Consensus in Colorado

---

**Bisociation-map 8: *Coming to consensus in the AIDS/HIV case***



worry beads. When they became stuck, participants would run to a bowl and grab worry beads. When they felt they were making progress, they would throw their beads back in the bowl. The process also included coffee breaks, sing-alongs, and improvisation sessions.

John Forester (1999a: 484) argues that in deep value conflicts the facilitator “doesn’t ask the parties to change each other’s beliefs or commitment, but to consider options that they find acceptable, within their value systems, for the issue at hand.” I would add that when parties change their ways of talking and listening to each other, they start changing also their views of “the other” and of the conflict (see Bennis 2003; Forester 1999b; Forester and Weiser 1996; Kolb et al. 1994; Susskind, McKernan, and Thomas-Larmer 1999). This may constitute the beginnings of a “this is play” frame.

### ***Toward a New Paradigm***

In this article, I have suggested a rough working model for creative conflict transformation drawing on the ideas of some philosophers whose ideas have not often been applied to conflict resolution. This model requires that those involved in a confrontational situation integrate the characteristics of what I call an “ambiguity-tolerance model” with others of what I call a “bisociation-displacement model.” These traits are listed in Table One.

What I call the ambiguity-tolerance model is not wrong; often it is all that is needed, and it is certainly preferable to an intolerant limited rationality that accepts no ambiguity. But it is insufficient to transform complex conflicts. It calls for suppressing or disregarding those emotional expressions deemed unproductive or dangerous rather than seeing them as points of departure for a multiple frames approach. A bisociation-displacement model, on the other hand, has one important advantage: it

---

**Table One**  
**Ambiguity-Tolerance Traits versus Bisociation-Displacement Traits**

---

Ambiguity-Tolerance Model	Bisociation-Displacement Model
Accept ambiguity	Accept bisociation
Tolerance	Displacement
Open-mindedness	Play and humor
Outsider lens + empathy	Engagement + displacement
Positive emotions are good; negative emotions must be avoided	All emotions are good, especially the negative ones
Difference	Otherness

---

draws on the clash between the two codes of body language and verbal language and on the unique human capability of using the resulting meta-frames to foster humor, imagination, and invention, which encourage reciprocal understanding and conflict transformation.

### **Conclusion: Seven Guidelines for the Art of Listening**

I suggest the following seven guidelines to help improve one's abilities to make the transition from a simpler model of listening to a more complex one.

1. Never be in a hurry to reach conclusions. Conclusions are the most ephemeral part of your research.
2. What you are seeing depends on your point of view. In order to see what your point of view is, you have to change it.
3. In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that he or she is right and ask him or her to help you understand what makes him or her right.
4. The emotions are a central instrument of cognition if you learn how to read their language, which is relational and built on metaphors.
5. A good listener is an explorer of possible worlds. The signals that he or she finds most important are the ones that seem both negligible and annoying, both marginal and irritating, because they refuse to mesh with previous convictions and certainties.
6. A good listener is happy to accept the self-contradictions that come to the fore in personal thoughts and interpersonal communications. Misunderstandings are accepted as opportunities for entering the most exciting field of all: the creative management of conflict.

---

7. To become an expert in listening you must follow a humor-based methodology. But once you have learned how to listen, humor arises on its own.

Helping ourselves and others to go against the tide is indeed very difficult. But it is fun and personally, I do not know anything more interesting and engrossing to be done in a lifetime.

## NOTES

1. Analytic classification follows the tenets of classical logic; that is, a classification is formed by grouping together objects with a shared characteristic (the strawberry and the oak tree are plants, the man and the lion are both dangerous, etc.). This process leaves relations in the background in order to isolate and focus on the characteristics of the terms of the relationship. By contrast, the analogical approach emphasizes the relationship, giving less importance to the terms themselves, which can be shuffled or substituted, as in the metaphorical language of dreams, without affecting the content of the message. Bateson's description of the cat's language in this article is a good example of the problems we encounter in translating from one code to the other.

2. For a less static representation, see Paulos (1980).

3. The other eight suggestions were: (1) carefully consider timing, when is the best time to raise an issue? (2) be clear with yourself about your real concerns; (3) use "I" messages, avoid blaming, finger-pointing, and so on; (4) focus on the future, communicate the way you want things to be rather than dwelling on what you do not like about the present; (5) Frame concerns in terms of your interests rather than making demands; "Here's the interest I'm trying to meet"; (6) assume that other points of view are possible; (7) don't propose your favorite answer too soon; and (8) don't escalate conflict by insisting you are right.

4. This method was inspired by the ways of native peoples of Samoa. See Strauss (1999) and Kraybill (2004).

## REFERENCES

- Alison, M. J. 1989. Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology. In *Women, knowledge and reality*, edited by A. Garry and M. Pearsall. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Argyris, C. and D. Schön. 1996. *Organizational learning II*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Bateson, G. 1936/1958. *Naven: A survey of the problems suggested by a composite picture of the culture of a New Guinea tribe drawn from three points of view*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- — —. 1963/1991. A social scientist views the emotions. In *Expression of the emotions in man*, edited by P. H. Knapp. New York: International University.
- — —. 1972. *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- — —. 1976. Foreword. In *Double bind*, edited by C. E. Sluzki and D. C. Ransom. New York: Grune and Stratton.
- — —. 1991. *A sacred unity: Further steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: HarperOne Books.
- — —. 1994. *Peripheral visions*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Bazerman, M. and M. D. Watkins. 2004. *Predictable surprises, the disasters you should have seen coming and how to prevent them*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Bennis, W. 2003. *On becoming a leader*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group.
- Davis, A. M. 2000. An interview with Mary Parker Follett. In *Teaching negotiation: Ideas and innovations*, edited by M. Wheeler. Cambridge, MA: PON Books.
- Donohue, W. A. 2004. Critical moments as "flow" in negotiation. *Negotiation Journal* 20(2): 147-151.
- Forester, J. 1999a. Dealing with deep value differences. In *The consensus building handbook*, edited by L. Susskind, S. McKernan, and J. Thomas-Larmer. London: Sage.
- — —. 1999b. *The deliberative practitioner: Encouraging participatory planning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- 
- — — . 2004. Responding to critical moments with humor, recognition, and hope. *Negotiation Journal* 20(2): 221-237.
- Forester, J. and I. Weiser (eds). 1996. *Making mediation work: Profiles of community and environmental mediators*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Department of City and Regional Studies.
- Fry, W. 1963/1968. *Sweet madness: A study of humor*. Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books.
- Hall, E. T. 1976. *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday.
- Harding, S. 1993. Rethinking standpoint epistemology. In *Feminist epistemologies*, edited by L. Alcoff and E. Potter. New York: Routledge.
- Hirschman, A. 1971. *Bias toward hope*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hughes, M., J. Forester, and I. Weiser. 1999. Facilitating statewide HIV/AIDS policies and priorities in Colorado. In *The consensus building handbook*, edited by L. Susskind, S. McKernan, and J. Thomas-Larmer. London: Sage.
- Koestler, A. 1964. *The act of creation*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Kolb, D. M. and J. Williams. 2003. *Everyday negotiation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kolb, D. M. et al. 1994. *When talk works: Profiles of mediators*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kraybill, R., 2004. Facilitation skills for interpersonal transformation. On the website: Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation. Available from <http://www.berghof-handbook.net>.
- Lipset, D. 1980. *Gregory Bateson: The legacy of a scientist*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lutz, C. 1988. *Unnatural emotions: Everyday sentiments on a Micronesian atoll and their challenge to Western theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Paulos, J. A. 1980. *Mathematics and humor: A study in the logic of humor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schön, D. A. and M. Rein. 1994. *Frame reflection: Toward the resolution of intractable policy controversies*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sclavi, M. 2003. *Arte di ascoltare e mondi possibili*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori.
- — — . 2007. *An Italian lady goes to the Bronx*. Milan: IPOC.
- Strauss, D. A. 1999. Managing meetings to build consensus. In *The consensus building handbook*, edited by L. Susskind, S. McKernan, and J. Thomas-Larmer. London: Sage.
- Susskind, L., S. McKernan, and J. Thomas-Larmer (eds). 1999. *The consensus building handbook*. London: Sage.
- Ury, W. 1991. *Getting past no*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Watzlawick, P., J. B. Bavelas, and D. D. Jackson. 1967. *Pragmatics of human communication*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Wheeler, M. 2004. Anxious moments: Openings in negotiation. *Negotiation Journal* 20(2): 153-169.