
NEGOTIATING NEEDS: USING CYBERNETICS AND SYNTONICS
TO REWRITE THE SCRIPT

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ABSTRACT

Negotiation between individuals, groups, and nations has been much in the news lately, and has merited the attention of system dynamics modelers, as was evident at the plenary session on negotiations at the 1990 International System Dynamics Conference. The "Behavioral Simulation Model of Single and Iterative Negotiations" presented there by Darling and Richardson provided a realistic model of critical factors negotiators take into account "while engaged in a joint decision-making process that leads to an outcome" (1990,229). This paper uses their model to explain why "long-term interdependent relationships ...[sometimes] drift into increasingly competitive, acrimonious behavior..."(240). Using a fictional piece--"Tell Me a Riddle" by Tillie Olsen-- this paper explores "the source of these [competitive] dynamics [which] may be found in the negotiators' cognitive characteristics--the structure of problems they confront, their situational goals, and their behavioral limits and biases..."(240). After analyzing the behavior of the negotiators-- a couple that has been married for forty-seven years--this paper reframes the power distribution in the relationship and re-writes the script, using cybernetics and syntonics, a system of interpersonal communication based on "being in tune with one another linguistically"(Elgin,1987,23). The resulting script saves the wife from becoming a victim of her husband's verbal abuse, and leads to more satisfactory negotiations.

THE PROBLEM

Stories can teach us why people act as they do. A skillful writer can explore a character's mind and history, providing the reader with insights into fictional personages that we seldom enjoy into our own minds or those of real people we know. Small wonder then that Freud used classical characters like Sophocles' Oedipus and Electra to describe certain forms of neurotic behavior. "Tell Me a Riddle" also can be used to describe a not uncommon pattern of behavior, a pattern of unsuccessful strategies for negotiations between a couple that has been married for nearly half a century.

One way to better understand "both the short term and long-term dynamics of negotiations and the cognitive factors that influence them"(240) is to study a specific case. "Tell Me a Riddle" provides such a case--the conflict between an aging married couple. Because the author, Tillie Olsen, helps us see into the minds of the



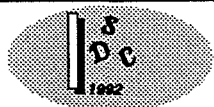
negotiators , we can see "the structure of problems they confront, their situational goals, and their behavioral limits and biases" as we are unlikely to see so clearly in real life.. We can, moreover, analyze their interactions as a model of a "long-term interdependent relationship in which the parties exhibit competitive, acrimonious behavior" (Darling and Richardson 240) . After forty-seven years of marriage, they are being torn apart because the husband wants to sell their house and join his lodge's cooperative for the aged, while the wife steadfastly insists on spending her last days in her own home. Olsen provides the reader with the context of their behavior, and illuminates the political, cultural, religious, and economic background which affects their value systems and their mental models.

CURRENT NEGOTIATING PROBLEM

The crisis that threatens the dissolution of their marriage is David's, the husband's, desire to be free of the "troubling of responsibility, the fretting with money" and to join the happy communal life" of his lodge's retirement home (Olsen 313). Until recently, Eva, the wife, has assumed these responsibilities, but now that she is going blind and deaf and is suffering from cancer (though they do not yet know that) he is learning what she has known all their married life, namely, how difficult it is to manage on their meager financial resources. He imagines, unrealistically, that life at the retirement home would be carefree. Trying once again to persuade her how much better life would be at the Haven, he tells her that there they would buy and cook the food according to Eva's preference. Then he reminds her how she used to say : "...better mankind born without mouths and stomachs than always to worry for money to buy, to shop, to fix, to cook, to wash, to clean." She responds bitterly: "How cleverly you hid that you heard. I said it then because eighteen hours a day I ran. And you never scraped a carrot or knew a dish towel sops. Now--for you and me--who cares? A herring out of a jar is enough. But when I want, and nobody to bother"(314). Then, not to hear his response, she turns off her hearing aid.

But he gives her no peace, and again and again nags her about the advantages of moving to the Haven. When he tries to interest her in the Haven with the news that they have a weekly reading circle she would enjoy, she angrily retorts: "Now when it pleases you, you find a reading circle for me. And forty years ago, when the children were morsels and there was a Circle, did you stay home with them once so I could go? Even once? You trained me well. I do not need others to enjoy."(315). Then he turns on the television so he need not hear her.

At this point in the story, both David and Eva are using punitive tactics, but while David is responding to his current frustration of being unable to persuade Eva to sign the papers to sell their home, Eva is responding to ancient wounds and frustrations. Back and forth they go, hurting and spiting each other . "A bellyful of bitterness," muses Eva. Olsen continues, "and every day the same quarrel in a new way and a different old grievance the quarrel forced her to enter and relive."(320) While he tells "eloquent and funny" stories of her contrariness, she thinks to herself: "Vinegar he poured on me all his life; I am well marinated; how can I be honey now?"(321)



TACTICAL ERRORS

According to Fisher and Ury (1981,49-50) people negotiate to satisfy basic human needs, such as security, economic well-being, a sense of belonging, recognition, and control over one's life. One of the fundamental problems facing David and Eva is that they have very different needs, and do not perceive their common needs until her last days. When their children urge them to compromise, Eva recognizes that "There is no help....Different things we need"(321). David wants to go to the Haven to "fish, or play cards, or make jokes in the sun with his cronies"(314). While David seeks affiliation, esteem, and self-actualization--the higher needs in Maslow's hierarchy-- Eva's needs are for physiological comfort and the security of her own place and her own personal belongings. She also relishes the peace and quiet she did not have when her children were young, and noisy, and needing her constant attention.

One reason they are having such difficulty reaching consensus about selling their house is that David and Eva appear never to have learned that "most negotiations take place in the context of an ongoing relationship where it is important to carry on each negotiation in a way that will help rather than hinder future relations and future negotiations" (Fisher and Ury 20). Over the many years of their marriage, David has taken a hard position in bargaining, making threats, applying pressure, and demanding one-sided gains as the price of agreement, while Eva has played a soft game, yielding to pressure and avoiding contests of will. One example of this hard bargaining is David's response to Eva's request that he not go out that night. Though he had planned to stay at home, he spitefully changes his plans after she asked him to stay."Hah, Mrs. Live Alone And Like It wants company all of a sudden...Yes, I am going out, and while I am gone chew this aloneness good, and think how you keep us both from where if you want people [the Haven] you do not need to be alone." She replies, "Go, go. All your life you have gone without me" (320).

Viewing negotiation as a "hard game" David sees the participants as adversaries, and the goal as victory. In contrast, Eva, like most women, tends to avoid conflict. In her recent book on the differences in the way men and women use language in their social interactions, author Deborah Tannen explains that :

To most women, conflict is a threat to connection, to be avoided at all costs. Disputes are preferably settled without direct confrontation. But to many men, conflict is the necessary means by which status is negotiated, so it is to be accepted and may even be embraced and enjoyed (150).

At the end, after winning all day- to- day battles, what has David won? Nothing much, he realizes at the end of the story. Remaining at his wife's bedside as she wanders in and out of fits of delirium, David meditates on his life. Then "the bereavement and betrayal he had sheltered...hidden even from himself-- revealed itself," and he whispered, "Lost, how much I have lost"(344) .



ALTERNATIVE SCRIPTS

Yet it is clear from "Tell Me a Riddle" that David and Eva were not always adversaries in a lose-lose situation. When they fell in love as young revolutionaries in Russia in about 1905, they shared the same ideals, goals, and hopes for the triumph of "a loftier race/.../with the flame of freedom in their souls/and light of knowledge in their eyes"(344). They affirmed the human dignity of all people--men and women, Jews and Gentiles. They believed that everyone deserved a basic education and decent working conditions and freedom from political, economic, and religious oppression. Both were activists for socialist causes, and Eva even suffered imprisonment for her boldness and defiance of unjust laws. David loved her for her passion and eloquence on behalf of human rights and human dignity. But, ironically and tragically, as they grew older, these freedom fighters fell into a pattern of male dominance and female submission.

What could Eva have done to avoid ending up as a victim of David's self-centeredness, and his habitual verbal abuse? Throughout the piece he calls her by sarcastic appellations, such as Mrs. Word Miser, Mrs. Busybody (331) and Mrs. Cadaver (344). For many of those 47 years she had become an object, rather than a person, and the relationship deteriorated from an I-Thou relationship of two subjects, to an I-It relationship of a subject to an object. Not until she is on her deathbed does David call her by her name--Eva. And not until then does David begin to begin once more to see Eva for who she is, a person, not merely a set of idiosyncrasies. As she is dying he remembers the vital and passionate human being who inflamed his political and physical passions, and not merely his housekeeper, cook, and caretaker of his children.

To re-write the script for their relationship, Eva would need to radically revise what Darling and Richardson refer to as the "negotiators' cognitive characteristics."(240). In their model of single negotiations, they show these characteristics to include the negotiators' behavioral characteristics--"bounded" capabilities, lack of perfect information; "framing" bias; and "fixed pie" bias."(220) See fig. 1 below.

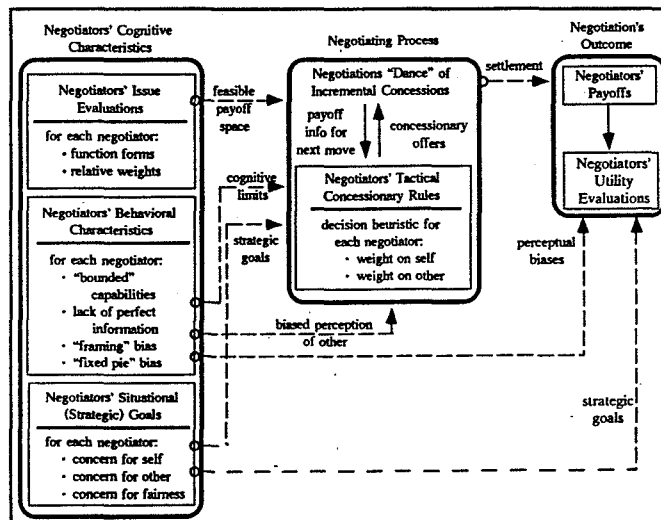


Figure 1. A model of single negotiations focusing on people, process, and outcome.

In the case of f Eva and David, we could say that their behavioral characteristics were determined by their social and religious context, which held that the woman must be subject to her husband. Consequently, David and Eva throughout their marriage were following a classic script written by patriarchal authority figures. Thinking about their teachings, Eva muses: "Religion that stifled and said: in Paradise, woman, you will be the footstool of your husband" (324) In this context, then, the woman was bound by religious and social pressures to yield to her husband's will, so David felt no need to be overly concerned with Eva's needs, and it is only when he needs her signature to sell the family home does he begin to speak about what SHE would like, and what would be good for her. Darling and Richardson's cognitive characteristics also include the negotiators' situational and strategic goals, comprised of "concern for self, concern for other, [and] concern for fairness" (229) In terms of these goals, David's concern for self has for many years outweighed his concern for "the other" and "concern for fairness." The first thing Eva must do, then, to revise the script is to see herself as an equal partner in the marriage, rather than her husband's subordinate, his footstool. Fair negotiations cannot take place when one party is willing to be a victim. As Fisher and Ury point out in their book about "negotiating agreement without giving in,"

It may be useful at the beginning of the negotiation [relationship] to say, "Look, I know this may be unusual, but I want to know the rules of the game we're going to play. Are we both trying to reach a wise agreement as quickly and with as little effort as possible? Or are we going to play 'hard bargaining' where the more stubborn fellow wins?" (148-9)

Clearly, in the case of David and Eva, a fundamental change in the STRUCTURE of the relationship--specifically, sharing the power more equally--is a pre-requisite to re-writing the script. Placing emphasis on the stability of the long-term relationship rather than the victory of the day (such as going out to a meeting when your partner needs you at home) is paramount. The "new Eva" would be an active partner in helping to supplement the family income, instead of being totally dependent on David as the wage-earner. "Seven little ones--for every penny I had to ask--and sometimes, remember there was nothing. But always I had to manage" (315). This would require different sacrifices from both Eva and David. She was, according to the story, a fastidious housekeeper, talented at sewing and mending. Had she used these talents outside the home, perhaps cleaning, cooking, and mending for other families, she would have had more money to support her own family. While she might have sacrificed her desire to keep her own home immaculate, she would have benefitted from the additional income. More important, she would have taught David, early in their marriage, to take greater responsibility for child-care and housekeeping.

In addition to re-framing their roles as husband and wife, they (especially Eva) would also learn to deal with verbal attacks. As Elgin explains:



It's crucial for you to realize that you do have choices, and that you have more control over them than you may have realized. The choice of words can be a life or death matter. (1987,85)

Eva, unfortunately, tried to believe that David's repeated verbal attacks were insignificant, and chose not to fight back. But such a pattern of behavior

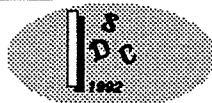
may end with WOMAN becoming a bitter and vindictive harpy, famous for her uncontrollable tongue and temper, and MAN the object of the sympathy of everyone who knows the two of them. (Elgin,1980,31)

Indeed, that was exactly the case with David and Eva. It is not insignificant that the bitterness Eva experienced and spoke of manifested itself in an angry demeanor, a sharp tongue, and a diseased gall bladder. Her daughter comments: "Her gall bladder. If that isn't a classic. "Bitter as gall"--talk of psychosom---"(322)

To avoid becoming victims of verbal abuse, Elgin urges that we base our language behavior on a feedback system which she describes in cybernetic terms. Feedback, she says, "consists of modifying the behavior of a system by reinserting the results of actual (and not just expected) past performance.In every language interaction, the adjustments you make in your language behavior should always be... based on the information you get from our listener's reaction to what you say. There are few communication strategies more guaranteed to fail than...your personal determinaton to talk in a particular way *no matter what happens*" (1987,25) .

Yet this determination to "talk in a particular way" indifferent to or oblivious of the listener's reaction seems to characterize the way David and Eva talk to each other. They are not really tuned in to each other, or, to use Elgin's language, they are not communicating "syntonically." According to Elgin, syntonics is "a system for putting human beings in tune with one another linguistically so that they are able to communicate with maximum efficiency and effectiveness and satisfaction."(23) For example, the parties in a conversation should try to match sensory modes. When David says "Look. In their bulletin. A reading circle.....Cultured people at the Haven that you would enjoy."(315) , Eva, if she were communicating syntonically, would match the visual mode with visual metaphors and words, such as, "I SEE what you mean." Instead, as we see from Olsen's piece, she responds in gustatory mode: "Enjoy! She tasted the word. Now, when it pleases you, you find a reading circle for me. And forty years ago, when the children were morsels [another gustatory image] and there was a Circle, did you stay with them once so I could go?" (315) The disparity in their use of sensory mode reflects the dissonance and ineffectiveness of their communication.

In addition to changing the power structure in the relationship, and listening and responding syntonically, the "new Eva" would not pretend that David's verbal abuse was harmless. Instead, she would find ways of responding to his insults that affirm



her sense of self-esteem, without necessarily denigrating her husband. In The Last Word on The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defence (1987) Elgin discusses five patterns of language behavior that Dr. Virginia Satir, a family therapist, has observed in "people under stress." Satir labels these **BLAMING, PLACATING, COMPUTING, DISTRACTING, and LEVELING (1987,35)**. The pattern that seems most common in the relationship between David and Eva is blaming. "Blamers pepper their speech with words like these: *always, never, nobody, everything, none, not once.*" (Elgin,36). Eva is certainly a blamer, vowing "Never again to be forced to move to the rhythm of others" and telling David that "not once" did he stay home so she could go to a meeting, and generally blaming him for inadequately providing for the economic needs of his family. But we can easily imagine a conversation which demonstrates that they are both blamers:

DAVID: If you were a good wife and good housekeeper, you would be able to stretch the money I bring home.

EVA: What makes you think I do not stretch it as much as is humanly possible? Look, it's not my fault that you can't earn a decent living.

According to Elgin, "This is an excellent example of the phenomenon called 'oscillation', [a sign that the system is] completely out of control."(1987,44) The anger increases, as does the volume of the shouting back and forth, creating a positive loop, and an unstable structure, and a pattern of dissonance and destructiveness. Elgin suggests that a person in Eva's place "ignore the bait--no matter how outrageous....---and reply straight to the presupposed attack, like this:

DAVID: "If you were a good wife and good housekeeper, you would manage on the money I give you."

EVA: "When did you start thinking I was not a good wife and housekeeper?"

Notice that now Eva has used what Elgin calls "a neutral reply" sidestepping David's attack, and surprising him, because he was expecting a different response. Elgin advises the prospective victim of such indirect verbal attacks to "IGNORE THE BAIT AND RESPOND NEUTRALLY TO THE PRESUPPOSED ATTACK," and describes techniques for "defusing the confrontation in taking the personal focus out of it."(1987,46-47)

In her revised script, the "new Eva" would attack the problem--inadequate family income--without blaming David. A wiser Eva would "express [her] appreciation for [David's]...effort"(Fisher and Ury 56). She might then use this conversation as an opportunity to advance her plans for working outside the home to supplement their income, and become a more equal partner in the marriage. (It is significant that the author of this story worked outside the home while raising her children). The "new Eva" would also know that "the choice of words to say is infinite"(Elgin,1987,84) and that the wise choice of words can help her defend herself verbally. She would use what Elgin calls "The power of supposition" and would "USE WORDS THAT HELP YOU PRESUPPOSE WHAT YOU WANT YOUR LISTENER TO ACCEPT"(85).



For example, Eva could say "Until we increase our family income, we should not plan to have more children." Such a statement lets David and Eva presuppose that they will increase their family income, and that they will practice family planning. This is different from saying "if we increase our family income" which expresses no confidence that their economic situation will improve. Another verbal tactic Eva might use is what Elgin calls the use of "time words plus the illusion of choice" (1987,86). For example, since it is obvious that David was reluctant to help with chores around the house, she might offer the illusion of choice by suggesting that AFTER he vacuumed the living room he might invite some of his cronies over to play cards. She might also offer the illusion of choice by asking if he prefers apple pie or chocolate cake when he stays home with the children and she goes to the meeting of the Reading Circle.

It is clear one cannot always motivate others by offering such illusions of choice, and equally clear that these are techniques of verbal manipulation. But, as Elgin says, it is impossible to avoid verbal manipulation:

Every verbal attempt that you make to persuade someone else to do anything at all--even the bare-bones goal of persuading someone to listen to the words you are saying--is a form of verbal manipulation. Even silence is a form of verbal manipulation (1987,88).

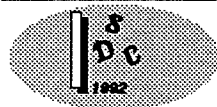
The techniques recommended by Elgin would help Eva to avoid becoming a victim of David's verbal abuse. Rather than feeling helpless and pretending to ignore his insults and verbal attacks, she could use language to assert her needs, and to articulate her concern for fairness in the relationship.

EASIER SAID THAN DONE

But it would have been quite impossible for David and Eva to re-write their script, which was dictated to them by their religion and culture. A "good wife" in that time and place would not have demanded more autonomy; such behavior would have been perceived as quite inappropriate. It would, moreover, be difficult even for the "new Eva" of today to re-write the script. According to our social mores, women are still perceived as the parent primarily responsible for care of the children and the home. While many husbands expect their wives to work outside the home and to share the economic responsibilities of raising a family, studies show there are often conflicts about childcare and housekeeping duties. Consequently, some women now enjoy the dubious pleasure of trying to work inside and outside the home, working, like Eva, eighteen hours a day.

CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulties, many couples today are re-writing their scripts, striving to build and maintain marriages that satisfy their individual needs and maintain the stability and equilibrium of the long-term relationship. Had David and Eva lived in such a time and place they too might have negotiated their differences to that the payoffs were mutually satisfactory. Long-term interdependent relationships can be cooperative rather than competitive, if all the parties are willing and able to work at it, and are committed to fairness in their negotiations.



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