

Negotiator's Mind

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This article explores moments of mapping side by side with the client as an aid to a therapeutic conversation. It evokes mapping as collaborative process of noticing, naming and negotiating how we respond to what we feel and do. In particular, it focuses on the dynamic relationship between what we say and how we share it.

Right at the beginning of our first session, Mark tells me has been sent to see someone 'for therapy'. He spits the two-word sentence out. "For therapy." I recoil physically, pressing my body into my chair. It is involuntary. A reciprocation which in part, I imagine, he intended. But then he looks up. As if he is apologizing for his vehemence: not wanting to offend me or attract too much attention to his defensive views. In the language of Cognitive Analytic Therapy, he has shimmered from the dismissing to the fearing being dismissed end of a reciprocal role.

In that moment, I have a feeling for him. A feeling for his struggle with his feelings we might say. Something more than empathy or sympathy. I am approaching him with a negotiator's mind. One that hopes to discover how his shifts from one emotional position to another are tied in with me. What does he bring out in me? Does he intend it? Does he have a sense of himself somewhere in and among these shifting feelings? Do I know where my sense of self lies or will it get entangled with his? Is it masked by a professional stance? A self-limiting mode of being that has become the therapist me over decades of therapeutic practice?

In my body, I have sympathetically shifted back and forward with him. I already feel warned that I might be taking part in something that he thinks might harm him. I also have a guiding thought -along the lines

of Freud's idea of the compulsion to repeat. Something has just been happening between us which is compelling. He has been here before! I have been here before.

We have all been here before because this is what we do as individuals and cultures. We are compelled to repeat things in search of meaning or in search of a lost, or never achieved coherence. We bring into the therapeutic conversation fragments of remembered, already worded, experience along with what Donnel Stern (2003) calls unformulated experience. Like random pieces from two different but similar looking jigsaws that we feel compelled to make fit together.

I am tempted to ask why he has the hostility to therapy but Mark and I are saved from this big, intrusive question because he carries straight on talking – leaving no room for me to interject.

Mark says of unnamed others in his life. "They are scared I might do something." Again, I recoil a little into my chair. An observer would not necessarily notice the bodily movement. Though the chair creaked. And perhaps Mark sensed this unconsciously in some co-embodied space we are now sharing. I feel, not so much pushed away - since I have not yet reached forward towards him - but pushed down. We are becoming entangled. Paradoxically, it is how we have to be, for the therapeutic work of disentangling (Horney 1945) or dis-embedding (Safran 2000), or standing in the spaces (Bromberg 1998) or re-formulation (Ryle and Kerr 2002) to occur. We must join the dance to know the dance and step in or out of it therapeutically.

Another ill-timed and ill-tuned question forms in my mind along the lines of asking how he wanted to begin this therapy but of course Mark has already begun. And for the next ten minutes there was little room for me to speak.

Mark's monologue was full of 'them' words, what they are doing to him, not doing for him, what they say of him, what they make him feel. It portrayed him as the victim of others but as he spoke relentlessly of this, it was me who felt like his conversational victim. The relational patterning of Mark's trauma was in

the transference between us. He was pulling me in to experience aspects of the very thing he was describing. Pieces of two jigsaws.

Mark is talking at me in the manner of what I call a dog story. A dog story – no offence to dog lovers - is a story that tends to be told complete and contained - all in and of itself. There is no room for symbolism, metaphor, asides, or innuendo. Dog stories are compelling because they are just about the content in a doggishly dogged way. As a narrative style, they can be comfortingly and safely all about it and not at all about you or me. Of course, underneath the telling of the story and deep within the story may be some powerful repetition of or parallel with patterns of relating from elsewhere than the story. But this kept well away from our individual or shared conscious by the closed style of telling the story.

Some of us a lot of the time, all of us some of the time, talk to each other in the style of telling 'dog' stories. A client comes and talks about their pain, their children, their life as a series of dog stories and there is no way into another level of meaning. Content and process are firmly segregated. What the story is about doesn't slip into how it is being told. The mid-twentieth century social theorist Walter Benjamin in contrasting the isolating experience of the novel with the communal experience of traditional story telling draws out a third and new form of communication which he calls information. He notes that the story teller is a living intermediary between the story and the listener. He hints at the importance of what we would say as therapists is being in the zone of proximal development of the listener, negotiating and amending the story to fit together both its source and its recipients. In our jargon the story teller is an agent of reformulation. A broker of narratives. Dog stories are the opposite. They are restricted to the giving of information. It is sometimes the manner of the therapy or therapist to invite a form of discourse more like dog stories. Just give me the information as I take your history.

In the early sessions of therapy, the therapist's only option with dog stories is to wait and see. It is tempting to ask dog story questions but this just takes us further into what the story is about and away

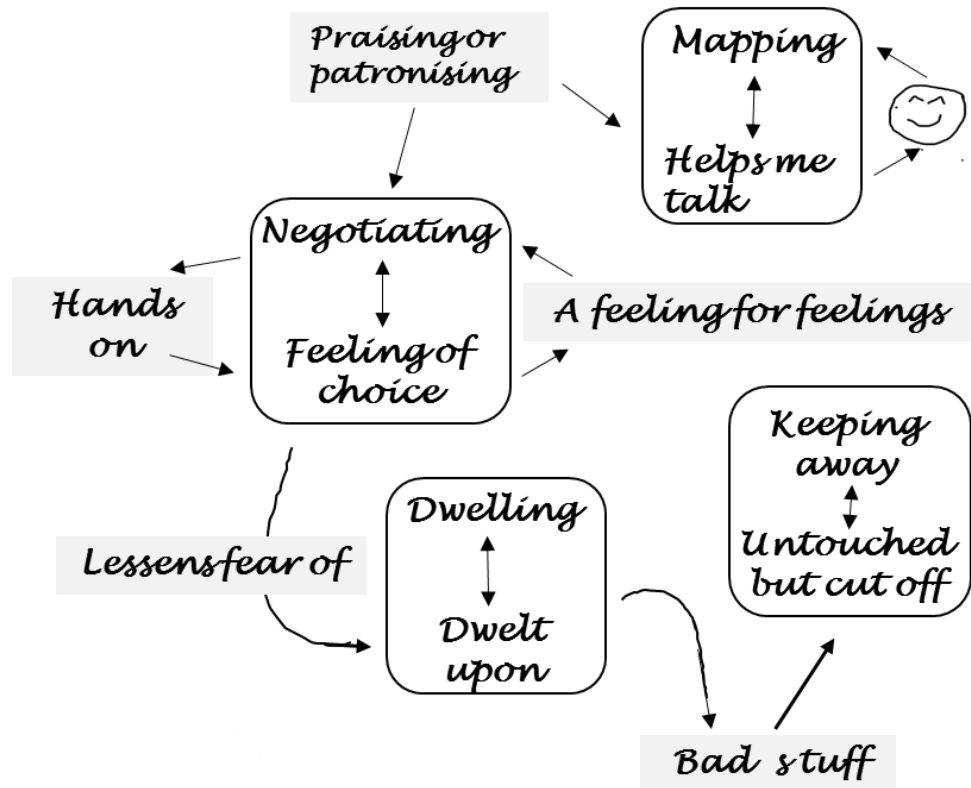
from how the story is being shared. The worst thing is to go head-to-head and ask why are you telling me this story? The client will feel accused they are doing something wrong. Something much gentler is needed to draw the process of the story telling out of the content of the story.

For me, mapping can do this. I already have a map in my head of the dance Mark and I are in but I cannot get it out on paper. We have not yet arrived in the moment for mapping. Visibly, I settle back in my chair, as if resigned to the role he has given me and perhaps because of this he says something that makes me sit up. Unprompted he has gone up a level and is negotiating with himself and me. He says in a critical way: "I don't want to be dwelling on the bad stuff." The dog story telling phase is over.

Suddenly there is therapy in the air between us. I look at him and our eyes acknowledge each other's presence for the first time. I say something which I imagine you the reader will think odd. I say to him, "Thank you." And.

"Good." Like a father to a child who has done something good. Then in the next breath, I apologize to him. "Oh that sounds a bit patronizing. Sorry. But it is really good what you said." He watches me like he is the therapist and I am the client yo-yoing

Figure 1. Mapping a moment with Mark



between feelings. As if he knows how to talk about this stuff and I don't. The push and pull of feelings

between us is too much to comprehend. It is time to map and track where we are. I put my hand out for a piece of paper. It is a big blank sheet of white paper from a pile which has been in front and between us on the low table from the beginning. I say. "It will help me listen if I can put some of the key words on paper." He watches me shuffling with the paper. I continue. "Map them out and see how they all connect up or not." He says. "What do you mean?" I say. "I don't know yet." Which feels slightly stupid. So, I correct myself and say. "I will see if I can show you." The mood between is uncertain but alive. I say to him with the blank piece of paper waving in my hand as a token of some intent to negotiate our immediate interactions. "Whilst you have been talking I have been worrying about how I should respond." I pause for breath. I continue. "It feels risky. I want to be helpful but worry I could be harmful. It might help me if we could just put on paper some of what we are struggling with."

In saying this, I write in the top right hand corner: *Mapping – Helps me talk* as the first reciprocal relationship. I put a smiley face next to the 'helping me' words and smile at him. I have no idea where this comes from. Perhaps I need to show him we are not going to dwell on things. Anyhow he smiles. I add the praising or patronizing as an example of what I am struggling with the mapping to negotiate with myself. I added that I would like to put here on paper the big thing you just said about 'Not dwelling on the bad stuff.' I write, as I speak to him and put *Dwelling to Dwelt upon* and circle it with plenty of space at the centre of the sheet of paper. And straight away at the bottom of the paper I put in bold letters **BAD STUFF**. (See figure 1) I have separated out the dwelling as an activity, and, something we might be doing together from the feeling of dwelt upon which might trigger a reciprocation of shutting off or keeping away. I have put the words 'bad stuff' in a separate place. My intent is to tease out on paper what is entangled between us in this moment and might be entangled in his life in general. It is pulling out the process of dwelling from the content of the bad stuff.

This shared process of mapping is not about the content of the bad stuff but about the way we are beginning to talk with each other. As we talk about the feelings involved, we feel the feelings and aided

by the versatility and safety of the map we develop a feeling for feelings in general. It is a map about us, not about it. It helps us navigate away from dog stories. I started the map with words that showed me struggling to be helpful to him and then put down his strongest word (the bad stuff) in a way that might help us negotiate and feel we have a choice.

Mark is now attentively involved but still wary. We have the possibility with the map of scaffolding a therapeutic conversation.

I recap where we have got to with the map. Recapping is the emotional heart of the conversational process of mapping. I say -and put the words down as I say it - that you want to have some choice about what we talk about. "Choosing and not feeling that: you will have to be dwelling on the bad stuff." I point at the word choosing and ask him what he would feel if we were genuinely choosing together. He said he thought he would have more control and as he says that word he leans in to the map and towards me.

So, I think to myself, the reciprocal to choosing is feeling free to choose. I underline the word negotiating and. "Is it through negotiating together and not dwelling (my pen circles the word dwelling as I speak) on our own that we co-create a feeling of choice?" And as we chew over the added words that have flowed from me recapping, his hand does something which I find moving. It reaches out to the paper on which we are mapping and he hovers outstretched and then pulls it back. Like an infant reaching for something that connects but not quite. We are learning to listen together with all our faculties- mind and body. The process of mapping is our assistant and potential mediator. It is a mindful form of mapping and tracking which we negotiate with our voices and our hands. I say to him as gently as possible, with palms out and upward facing. "You are figuring something out with your hands moving about the map."

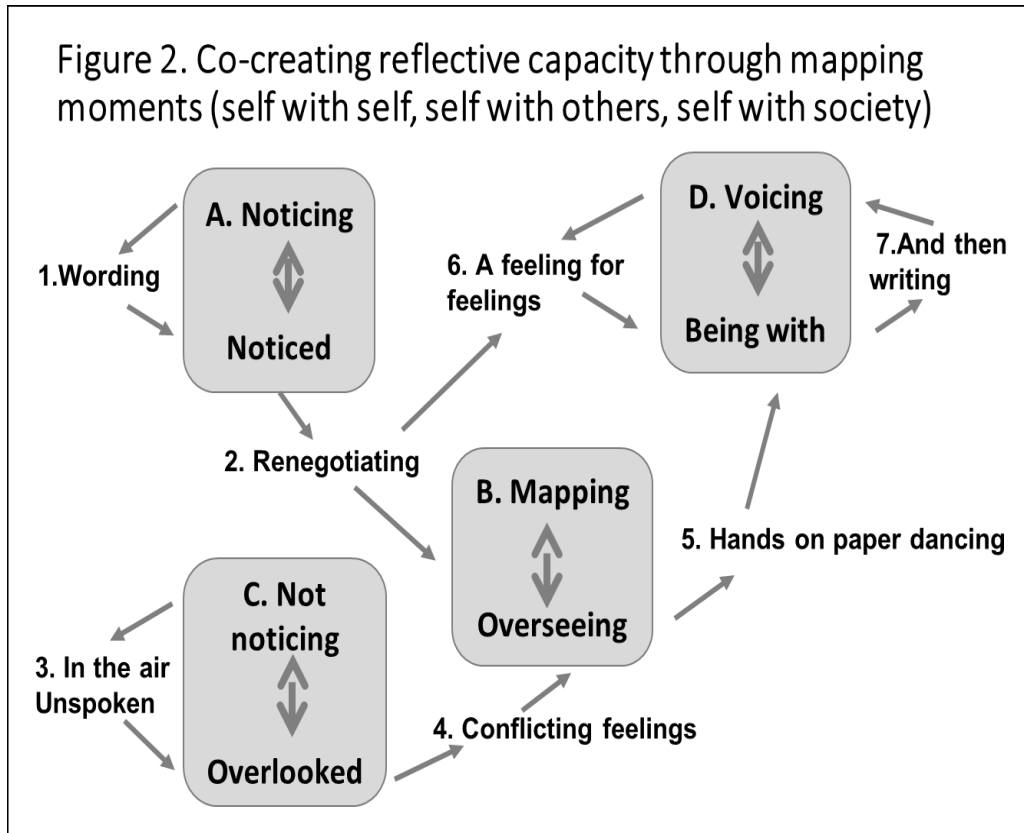
He fully puts his hands on the map as if taking ownership of something and says. "I want choice (left hand hovers over the top of the page) when I think I am getting near this (right hand over the bottom page stuff

- the bad stuff). I want to *keep away* from the bad stuff. My hands join his. I add the phrase *keeping away-not touching*. Our hands are dancing a bit around the words on the map covering some, emphasizing others. I tell Mark that I like the way we are involved. "With our hands and the map we may notice when we are stuck on the bad stuff." "Hands on." he says and shimmies his hands sideways and gives me a two thumbs up.

Bit by bit, it is becoming our map: neither mine nor his, but a map about us worrying and struggling to manage this situation we are both in. It is not a map of his bad stuff. That is a task for a later part of the therapy when we both have greater confidence in mapping therapeutically together. It is a therapy process map helping us negotiate and shape a working partnership or therapeutic alliance. However, we both seem to magically think that the bad stuff is now out there on the paper where it can be touched or not. It is a beginning and a long way from dog stories and the disembodied, soulless gathering of information. It is map of a moment or so of therapy between us but I imagine, or hope, it will be a map of the way to a deeper engagement with Mark and his troubles. It is a transferable map.

Reflections

In reflecting on this piece of writing, I wanted to highlight the live process of mapping as an aid to a therapeutic conversation which is simultaneously cognitive, emotional, social and relational. The process is a multi-media, multi-sensory one. As rather schematically summarized in Figure 2, the shared process of noticing key words or **wording (1)** in the conversation points to noticing by naming what is going on. Such a process shimmers between conscious and unconscious cognitive processes and procedures. Sometimes we don't find the words directly. They find us. It seems to me to be a process of wording and rewording. Each new voicing of a word qualifies and softens or intensifies the previous word and its voicing. In the process we are reciprocating by **renegotiating (2)** through the activity of mapping and overseeing what is going on. But also, there is an invisible gift to the mapping process which comes from



the blank spaces of the map which point to fragments of dissociated, unnoticed stuff calling for attention as unformulated experience. They are often *in the air*

unspoken (3) and can sneak into the therapeutic relationship as enactment dynamics under the radar of conscious attention.

A responsiveness to signs and signals of *conflicting feelings* (4) and confusing thoughts on the map is part of the struggle for a negotiator's mind. The mix of conscious and unconscious interaction has the potential to be, connected with through the movement of *hands paper dancing* (5) which in turn develops a *feeling for feelings* (6).

The process of mapping as we talk invites two further activities. One is writing: a very familiar and more procedural part of the therapeutic technique of CAT and used to anchor and guide a reformulation journey. The other is voicing. Voicing is neglected (too easily taken for granted) but of profound importance to how moments of rewording, mapping, rethinking and rewriting and talking are joined in mind and body. The **voicing (D)** of what is mapped, or written, connects most directly to the emotional centers of the brain. It invites us into **being with** each other. It is through our shared experience of

finding and giving voice, that Mark and I will experience something akin to negotiator's mind as a step to him becoming his own therapist: cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally and relationally. I hear the negotiation in our voices before we know it in our minds.

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