

Empathic Mutual Positioning in conflict transformation and reconciliation processes

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Abstract

Positioning theory is employed in a re-analysis of data from post-conflict reconciliation conversations between Jo Berry, whose father was killed in an IRA bombing, and Patrick Magee, who planted the bomb. The analysis shows how discourse activity simultaneously positions, not just the Self and the Other as individuals, but also in dialogic relation to each other, whereby multi-layered identities are revealed, negotiated, and shifted.

This paper has several aims. Firstly, it introduces the new notion of Empathic Mutual Positioning, to describe a key dynamic in reconciliation through which new mutual recognition and understanding is made possible for both speakers. It shows how it drives the process of reconciliation, and how it evolves and changes as conciliation proceeds. The paper illustrates the three functions of Empathic Mutual Positioning: expansive, embracing, and reflexive. It argues that Empathic Mutual Positioning is indeed a key, distinctive, and essential component in reconciliation processes. As an *intentional commitment* to conciliation it operates as a force, but it is also a *dynamic psychic process* in that it changes the people involved while unfolding.

Secondly, the paper discusses the potential benefits of applying Empathic Mutual Positioning as a strategic approach to conciliation by mediators engaged in reconciliation practice. Mediators can encourage, support or exploit Empathic Mutual Positioning to scaffold the process and support participants at difficult points in the conciliation.

It also discusses how this new concept of Empathic Mutual Positioning relates to the Positioning-Interests-Needs model widely used in mediated practical work in conflict resolution / transformation.

Key words: Empathy, Reconciliation, Positioning, Conflict, Mediation, Dialogue, Positioning Theory.

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Introduction

The 'Brighton bomb' was planted by [Provisional Irish Republican Army](#) (IRA) operative [Patrick Magee](#) in the [Grand Hotel](#) in [Brighton, England](#) where [Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher](#) and her cabinet were staying for the [Conservative Party](#) conference. The bomb exploded on 12 October 1984, killing five people including Sir Anthony Berry. Patrick Magee was imprisoned for his part in the attack and released as part of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 which aimed to bring peace to Ireland after years of conflict. Anthony Berry's daughter, Jo, was 21 years old at the time of the bombing. Rather than responding to the loss of her father with bitterness, she determined to "bring something positive out of" the tragedy (Cameron, 2011b, p.15). She learnt about Irish history and politics, visited Northern Ireland, met other victims of the violence, and, in 1999, managed to arrange a meeting with Pat Magee so that she could find out from him about his motivations. Since then they have met more than 30 times, first talking only in private but later speaking in public and working together in peace building activities. They now consider each other as 'friends', although their relationship is more complex than that, continuing to evolve through occasional difficult periods.

Conflict and conciliation

The term 'conciliation process' is used as an overarching label for the evolving discourse between Jo Berry and Pat Magee as they come to understand more about each other across the divide caused by violence (Cameron, 2011b). The term is intended to encompass both the processes that each person separately engaged in and the shared processes in their meetings, recognizing that people operate at the same time both as individuals and as a dyad (Poland, 2007). Their conciliation process is worthy of investigation because it has been successful and so may indicate what makes for favorable conditions for the development of empathy in conflict transformation situations. As such it is used in this paper as case study illustrating the nature and benefits of an Empathic Mutual Positioning approach to reconciliation.

Empathy concerns our understandings of, and feelings towards, other people. Recent research, across a range of disciplines, suggests that empathy is best seen as a collection of different types of cognitive and affective/emotional processes, both automatic and more controlled. At the core of this complex concept is the activity of imagining how it is to be someone else, to step inside their world and glimpse their concerns, cognitively and emotionally, as if from their perspective. When the gap between Self and Other includes perceived differences in moral values, empathy

becomes particularly demanding, generating an “emotional ambivalence” that must be accommodated (Halpern and Weinstein, 2004, p. 581).

Automatic empathy (sometimes called emotional empathy, emotional attunement, or emotional contagion) occurs as a response to how another person appears to be feeling or acting; an automatic process of embodied simulation enables an observer to make sense of the physical actions of others, through mirror neuron activation and somatic markers (Damasio, 1999; Decety & Jackson, 2004; Gallese, 2003, 2005) Controlled empathy, or perspective-taking, is a more conscious process of trying to know, imagine or understand the perspective of another (e.g. Preston and de Waal, 2002). In *self-based* empathy, we understand another person by ‘putting ourselves in their shoes’, i.e. by imagining the Self in the Other’s world. To go more deeply than this, however, and imagine how it is for the Other in their world, *other-based* empathy needs knowledge about the other person and how they frame the world; this requires and also depends on a differentiation of Self from Other (Batson et al, 1997; Lamm et al., 2007, 2009).

Although reciprocal empathy is said to underpin communication (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), relatively little empirical work has investigated empathy in discourse activity, i.e. how people express, resist or negotiate empathy, outside of the medical and psychotherapeutic professions (for detailed review of empathy research see Cameron, 2011a; 2011c).

Self and Other Positioning

Positioning is the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines (Davies and Harré, 1990). “Positioning Theory is a contribution to the cognitive psychology of social action. It is concerned with revealing the explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning that are realized in the ways that people act towards others” (Harré et al. 2009, p. 5). Positioning Theory has broadly been defined as the “study of local moral orders as ever-shifting patterns of mutual and contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting” (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 1). In short, positions are used to account for what happened and to warrant specific identities within those accounts. Instead of seeing people as fixed in social locations, as suggested by metaphor of role, (Davies & Harré, 1990), Positioning Theory constructs people as engaging in dynamic social relationships in which each participant creates and makes available positions for themselves and others to take up, ignore or resist. Positioning Theory thus captures both continuous personal identities and discontinuous personal diversity (which invites a focus on exchanges produced in conversation) (Phoenix, 2004, p. 105).

Smith (1988, p. xxxv) defines the subject as “the series or conglomerate of positions, subject-positions, provisional and not necessarily indefeasible, in which a person is momentarily called by the discourses and the world he/she inhabits’. In speaking and acting from a position, people are bringing to the particular situation their history as a subjective being, i.e. the history of one who has been in multiple positions and engaged in different forms of discourse (Davies & Harré, 1990). Positions become subject positions if people take up a particular position as their own. Once they have done this, they see the world from that perspective and are more likely to act in accord to it, be emotionally invested in it, and take on the moral responsibilities, rights and duties with which it is associated (Phoenix, 2004, p. 106). Thus, taking on a position as one’s own has important emotional impact and repercussions for the subject.

Positioning Theory proposes a model of social interaction based on the interrelation of three components: positions, storylines, and speech acts. It is through the operations of such positioning triads that meaning emerges. Positions are always relational; by positioning oneself in a particular way, one is also positioning the other in a correlative position. Thus positions constrain what one may meaningfully say and do and are in turn dependent on the relative storyline that makes that particular position available. Finally, distinguishing between the *illocutionary* force of an utterance (what is literally said) and the *perlocutionary* force of that utterance (the social effect of the utterance), positioning theorists pay great attention to positioning as a speech act (Austin 1962; Searle, 1969). Thus, dialogue in positioning terms is viewed as performing social actions; by positioning themselves in particular ways within specific storylines, speakers might be trying to warrant their credibility, undermine the other’s action, convince, justify, etc.

Because of these characteristics, Positioning Theory shifts the focus of social inquiry from enduring cognitive states to the study of flux in social life. Dissatisfied with the static take on social interactions in traditional social psychology, according to which attitudes are presumed to be relatively permanent states of a human being and to be quite difficult to change, positioning theorists provide an alternative of regarding social episodes as displaying storylines. For example, instead of conceptualizing conflict in terms of the enduring personal cognitive states of antagonists, the alternative view is proposed that “conflicts are sustained by the adoption of the hostile parties of conflicting storylines, in the light of which incompatible and irresolvable contradictions in meanings have become entrenched” (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 102).

An important role in conflict situations is played by indirect or presumptive positioning, which has been defined as “the use of attributions of mental (e.g. stupid), characteriological (e.g. unreliable) or moral (e.g. puritanical) traits to position someone, favourably or unfavourably, with respect to oneself and one’s interests” (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 6). To position someone negatively denies them specific rights

and grants the speaker the moral high ground; it may contribute to the dehumanising of the Other that contributes to conflict. This *malignant positioning* (Gilbert & Mulkey, 1982; Kitwood, 1990; Sabat, 2001, 2003) is often part of a dynamic process of repositioning where the speaker is resisting or challenging an original positioning of themselves. “To engage in repositioning oneself or others is to claim a right or a duty to adjust what an actor has taken to be the first order positioning that is dominating the unfolding of events”. (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p.7). As Harré and Slocum (2003) have rightly pointed out, in a dispute it is an enormous advantage to be occupying the moral high ground, whilst positioning one’s opponent in various disadvantageous ways can reduce the scope of their actions markedly. Additionally, doing so has the advantage of making sure that what they say and do is interpreted according to a storyline and as a speech act that suits one’s own case (p. 129). This is a commonly used technique not just in law courts, but in everyday conversation, to undermine, belittle and disempower the other.

We introduce the concept of Empathic Mutual Positioning, in contrast with malignant positioning, to describe an intentional but not necessarily conscious positioning of the other that stems from benevolent intent.

With this term we try to capture the commitment to granting each participant in the conciliation process the right to be listened to and have their experience considered empathically - i.e. with an intention to understand when explaining themselves and their actions - but also the psychological openness to be changed by the process. As the latter is bound to fluctuate during the process of conciliation, the element of commitment in Empathic Mutual Positioning is essential. Therefore, like the malignant version, the empathic positioning proposed in this paper can also be seen as strategic in that it directs the perlocutionary force and has psychosocial effects and potential ideological implications. The mutual empathic positioning establishes or confirms, particularly at difficult points in the dialogue, the benevolent intentions of the speaker. It acts as a reminder to each other that the participants are committed to the peace process and that their positions might be different but are not antagonistic. It also denotes a willingness to try to deal with the emotional ambivalence likely to be generated by listening to the other.

We identify, exemplify and discuss three functions of Empathic Mutual Positioning – the expansive, the embracing and the reflexive:

1. Through the *expansive* function of Empathic Mutual Positioning, participants allow expanded positions for themselves and the other. This function counteracts potential re-entrenchment into old and oppositional positions and returns humanity to the individuals involved in the conciliation process by allowing them complexity.

2. The *embracing* function of Empathic Mutual Positioning fosters acceptance of difference in many manifestations, but primarily in terms of the different needs – both within the same person and between the actors involved in the process. This idea hinges on a view of human beings as conflicted, as psychological (e.g. conscious and unconscious parts of their minds wanting different things), social and relational subjects. Through the *embracing* function of Empathic Mutual Positioning, needs can be preserved as asymmetric, thus enabling mutual recognition and respect.
3. The *reflexive* function of Empathic Mutual Positioning refers to participants' manifest awareness and mindfulness of how the other is, or might be, affected by one's own words and actions. This crucial function allows participants to simultaneously 'tell their story' whilst mitigating its impact, thus reconfirming at delicate points of the conciliation dialogue their commitment to the process and their empathic appreciation of the other's suffering without having to forgo their own.

The cumulative effect of these three functions is to scaffold the process of reconciliation, enable gestures of empathy (Cameron, 2011b), and facilitate conflict transformation.

Method and Findings

Cameron (2007, 2011b) carried out detailed metaphor-led discourse analysis on a set of transcribed conversations between Jo Berry and Pat Magee at private meetings in 2000 and 2001, in a radio interview in 2003, and at a public event in 2009. The analysed set of conversations forms the dataset for this study, re-analysed in terms of positioning.

The following section illustrates and discusses the three functions of Empathic Mutual Positioning through an analysis of a filmed private conversation between Jo and Pat which took place in February 2001, just three and half months after their first meeting. No mediator was present. We decided to focus on one specific meeting to illustrate how and where positions emerged within a localised context; these were more marked because the meeting took place at an early stage of the process. These extracts, however, are exemplary of what happened across the whole dataset. The analyses, and indeed this paper, have been discussed with both Jo and Pat several times.

The extracts were selected on the basis of containing a specific storyline, or because they show one of the speakers taking, explicitly or implicitly, a particular position and speaking from that position. The numbers in brackets preceding the quote indicate line numbers within the transcript and have been included to orient the reader to the temporal dimension of the dialogue. A comma indicates a short pause or fall in

intonation, a full stop a pause or fall in intonation, and (xxx) and <XX> indicate indecipherable talk. Numbers in bracket indicate the duration of longer pauses in seconds; [...] indicates that some text has been omitted. *hmh* refers to sounds made by the listener which might communicate either agreement or acknowledgement of what has been said, thereby confirming that they are listening.

The three functions of Empathic Mutual Positioning

Expansion of the Self through Empathic Mutual Positioning: taking and resisting positions.

In this section we illustrate how the expansive function of Empathic Mutual Positioning allows the Other to take up multiple positions without losing one's own. This part of Pat's speech comes very early on in the conversation

Pat (82-94) *I am sitting here as a perpetrator, you know, because that's how we're categorised. I'm a perpetrator, you're the victim, but you are also, and I find you very open. to my story. where I, I feel there is more to me than just a perpetrator.*

Pat's offering of the position of perpetrator for himself and of victim for Jo tells us that Pat is using here a legal storyline. However, Pat positions himself as "more than just a perpetrator", thus setting the tone for the whole dialogue and the reconciliation process which sees Jo and Pat involved in the attempt to expand their initial positions and find new ones for themselves and for the other.

Pat continues:

you know the fact that , (1.0) all my adult life, I've been a.. an active republican, except those little times when I was, when I was locked up.(2.0) and, there's a slow coming to terms with that past.

This short extract contains the two other storylines around which the whole exchange evolves: political and psychological. Through the political storyline, Pat takes the position of an active republican, and his 'active' affiliation is presented as an enduring feature lasting "all my adult life", with the exception of the time spent in prison. Simultaneously Pat describes a current "slow coming to terms with the past"¹. This counselling speech marks a shift to the psychological storyline and provides both speakers with the possibility of a shared position: that of having suffered trauma and needing to come to terms with the past. We will come back to the importance of this as a potential shared position as sufferers alongside their other, diverging, positions. Here it is important to point out how tensions can be detected not just inter-subjectively (i.e. between Pat and Jo) but also intra-subjectively (in the complexity of Pat's personal political identity), as the next quote illustrates.

Pat (115-138): *I'm an active republican. I was an active republican, but I'm not a reformed terrorist, neither am I a pacifist,, I believed at one point, still believe at one point, that, the armed struggle was necessary. I now believe that we can further our ends politically.*

The above quote is bursting with 'messiness' and ambivalence. The time confusion and contradictions contained in the statement "*I'm an active republican – I was an active republican*", "*I believed at one point, still believe at one point*", capture Pat's troubled subject position (Wetherell, 1998), and illustrate Pat actively engaging in identity work, by trying out various subject positions, but also suggest that these are enabled and constrained by the resources made available by larger discourses. Constraints can appear as 'trouble', when an identity is potentially challengeable as implausible or inconsistent (Taylor, 2005, p.99). The constraints of the legal and political storylines are evident in how they position the speakers in relation to each other: the legal storyline only allows for subjectivities to be defined as right or wrong, guilty or innocent, while the political storyline fosters an 'us and them' division. Thus, as early as the first minutes of the interaction, we are presented with a complex and multilayered picture of what this conciliation work is about, one that spans many decades and results from hundreds of years of history of conflict before that.

What Pat is advocating here is not a story of drastic personal change: "I was a different man back then", or one of naivety or indoctrination: "I was young and impressionable". Rather he is saying: "What I did is regrettable, but it was necessary". It is important to stress this because if he had taken a different line, Jo's empathy might not have been necessary for the work of conciliation; either one of them might have bridged the gap between them. It is in fact fundamental for the process that Jo is open to listening to something very uncomfortable. It also clarifies the difficulties of the task, as if Pat were saying: "This is what I really am; can you listen to it?"

Defining what he is, however, proves a complicated task for Pat, arrived at through a process of elimination. So far he has positioned himself as not a reformed terrorist yet as non pacifist, an active (politically) but not active (not armed) republican. National identity is also briefly considered and quickly abandoned by Pat as he does not consider himself a nationalist.

What transpires from this list of positions resisted by Pat is his need to state the complexity of his identity. This confirms Cameron's (2011b) analysis, which identifies the need to rectify self misrepresentations as a crucial element in conciliation. What the positioning analysis adds is the recognition of a reflective process of making new identities, running in parallel with the process of conciliation. Particularly with Pat, one can sense the urgency of such work, the disorientation after the traumas of armed struggle and what brought him to that, then of imprisonment, and now of facing up to the damage caused by his actions. The complex process of self-positioning thus can be seen in Pat's effort in testing different positions, bridging and integrating them into a

meaningful and somehow cohesive new sense of identity. Jo's empathic listening is vital to this process, demonstrating how 'the other' plays a crucial role in the formation of subjectivity (Frosh, 2009): "The outside other is primary, built into the structures of a society premised on difference and division; and it is in relation to this primary otherness that each individual subject emerges" (2005, p. 205). Something passes between the other and the subject, a kind of code, glittering enigmatically, attractive and elusive, seductive and irreconcilably alien. In this passing between, it becomes clear just how much there can be no personal subject without the other; instead it is *from the other* that the subject comes (2005, p. 210).

In this context, Empathic Mutual Positioning is not simply *facilitative*, but crucially *formative* in the dialogical process of identity formation which is, by nature, always relational. In other words, Pat needs Jo's tolerance and acceptance of all his fragmented identities, in order to begin to make them his own. This is particularly the case here, where the Other has historically been the enemy and where the process of conciliation has potential for long term social transformation. By trying out and feeling accepted within the safe environment of the localised conciliation event, participants are enabled to take on those new identities in their lives outside the meeting room, as we can see in the next section.

Embracing in Empathic Mutual Positioning: Accepting difference and taking on the other's pain

For listening to be truly empathic, it has to happen across important differences. Pat and Jo spell these differences out:

Pat (496-508) *I really appreciate the fact that you, don't just see me as a perpetrator. and that, as I said, somebody from your background, is open to the republicans, prepared to, you know, to listen to them. another thing I'd like to say, you are an English woman. I'm born in Ireland. but I've never thought of myself as a nationalist. and I suppose most people, thinking about republicans, that would classify them, they'd categorise them, they are nationalists, and then and again, that seems a very narrow thing. constraining thing.*

[...]

Jo *as, an English woman,. as the daughter,.of an English MP, who was part of Thatcher's government,*

In the first quote we can see how the expansive function of Empathic Mutual Positioning does not stop with the individuals involved in the process, but has the potential of affecting larger groups. As Pat says, he really appreciates that somebody from Jo's background "*is open to the republicans, and prepared to listen to them*". This suggests that the benefits and peace-building potential of empathic positioning are expansive both in terms of granting complexity to the individual participants, but also in

spreading out to the groups they belong to. Belonging to groups, however, brings with it the issue of difference, which neither of the participants ever shy away from. In the two quotes above, difference, which earlier was expressed in legal terms, is repeated here in terms of political positioning and national and gender identity. Even though here Pat focuses specifically on national difference, difference in terms of class is equally important. Pat repeatedly defines himself as working class or sympathiser with the working class in Britain, whilst Jo's narrative, particularly when she refers to her brother attending Eton, implicitly positions her as upper class and, as implied by Pat's reference to her background, daughter of a Conservative politician and member of the Thatcher government. These differences, far from being denied, disguised or hidden, are constantly acknowledged. What these "troubled" positions illustrate is not simply that Pat needs to express his complex and multiple self positioning across his life, but also the challenges involved in what Jo and Pat are trying to do. Two factors of this complexity are particularly important and have to be renegotiated time and time again during the conciliation process.

The first relates to the wider cultural and historical contexts and loyalties surrounding Pat and Jo. Belonging to groups divided by hundreds of years of conflict means that the participants have to be constantly aware of the connections between what happens in the localised context of the conciliation process and their individual wider psychosocial loyalties, dramatically different for the two participants. Pat² sees himself under duty to represent republican views that have been previously silenced. In order to do this, as we will see in later extracts, he needs to reiterate that violence was the only means available to make their views heard. This, however, presents Jo³ with a moral dilemma and leaves her particularly vulnerable to her family's misgivings about her dialogue with Pat. The two participants are constantly aware of having to account to 'their own people' for what they do during the conciliation dialogue. These complex and profoundly different psychosocial contexts can operate like centrifugal forces, pulling the participants away from the conciliation process.

The second set of factors working against conciliation is of an intra-psychic nature and less explicitly articulated by Jo and Pat, but hinted at from time to time. For example:

(242-252)

Jo *the less, I am seeing you, as the perpetrator and, the more, I am seeing you, someone who's had, a lot of struggle, and a lot of reasons to do what you've done.*

Jo *if we can talk now,*

(995-998)

Pat *hmh*

Jo *and if I can understand, what it is that, drove you to violence. and I can hear it.*

(1020 – 1028)

Jo *I have parts in me that don't want to listen.*

Pat *hmh*

Jo *and yet, I can listen. and I can understand. your oppression. and the suffering. and the injustice.*

(2643-2651)

Pat *I feel it too, I do feel it. I said before, I felt obligated as a republican, to reach out. etcetera. but it was never a passion. it was an obligation.*

(2764-2775)

Pat *I said that I felt, an obligation, as a republican, to be open to the enemy's story, if you like, , the other combatant's , perspective.*

The internal conflict over participating in conciliation is expressed in different ways by the two participants. Pat clarifies that it was never a passion that drove him, but rather duty towards his fellow republicans, thus suggesting a reluctance or emotional discomfort. We'll come closer later in the paper to the emotional pain involved in re-examining old wounds. Here, the important information is the crucial role played by commitment in keeping Pat engaged in the conciliation process.

Commitment is also evident in Jo's narrative. Jo's naming "parts" in her that don't want to listen, and the internal conflict signalled through the qualifier "yet", suggest internal private battles between defensive cutting off vs mourning; demonising and blaming the other vs integration and acceptance of the other's humanity. The intricate and mutually reparative psychodynamics involved in re-humanising the other will be explored more fully elsewhere (Seu and Cameron, in preparation). Here, we are illustrating some of the forces working against the process of conciliation. Jo's words make explicit how what she is trying to do does not come naturally but, as in Pat's case, relies on her continuous intentional willingness to enter the other's world, however painful that might be. It is precisely this intentional stance that makes Empathic Mutual Positioning the sustaining force in the conciliation process.

Finally, there is the issue of the different and evolving nature of the participants' needs driving the conciliation process. Jo's and Pat's needs are dynamic and multifaceted - what might have been their original needs should not be conflated with new needs that emerged relationally. For example, it is clear that it was originally Jo's emotional and psychological need to make sense of her tragic loss and to heal it that

initially spurred the process of conciliation between her and Pat. Jo had repeatedly sought a meeting with Pat but had been told that Pat did not need to meet her. Eventually he did agree to meet and many other encounters followed. Pat makes sense of his motivation in terms of being the representative of the republicans' political need to "explain and rectify their representations" but, as the next section illustrates, a more personal need to "come to terms with the past" seems to have played a big part in his decision, albeit perhaps unconsciously to begin with.

The third section of the findings illustrates how this disparate and contrasting set of needs can converge through the facilitating functions of Empathic Mutual Positioning. As a shared psychosocial attitude and commitment to peace and reconciliation, and as a state of mindfulness of the other without losing oneself, Empathic Mutual Positioning allows participants to work towards both the prevention of future violence and the overcoming of past traumas: "*bring something positive out of this*" (Jo: 297) and "*(help) finding other ways so it needn't happen in the future*" (Jo: 272-74).

The reflexive function of Empathic Mutual Positioning: mindfulness of one's own and the other's pain and of the space in between

Pat: (696-701) what was done, needed to be done. again, I'm conscious of the fact that I'm sitting here, with a victim of those actions. justifying it's one thing. coming face-to-face, with somebody who suffered as a consequence, is another thing. and, I suppose, you only come face-to-face with it in a situation like that. there is, it's so easy to lose, sight, of, you know, the enemy's humanity.

This powerful speech from Pat encapsulates the psychosocial journey of the conciliation process and helpfully signposts the various discursive positions available to the participants. The quote starts with a strong statement that presents a political justification of the armed struggle as an inevitable moral imperative. Presented as such, it leaves very little room for negotiation or ambivalence, which illustrates the constraints imposed by using a political storyline. The legal storyline is not much better, as participants are equally trapped in their individual positions of victim and perpetrator.

It is in this rigid context that one can see starkly the mitigating effect of Empathic Mutual Positioning, particularly through its reflexive function, which allows Pat to state his position while being simultaneously mindful of the impact of such statements on Jo. One can follow the reflexive movement as Pat focuses back and forth from himself to Jo, back to himself again and so on. As has been pointed out at the beginning of this paper, we are not dealing with a change of heart here – Pat does not *ideologically* regret the armed struggle or, even, having planted the bomb. Yet, whilst holding this contextually uncomfortable position, he is also able to attend to Jo's experience, and

appears *emotionally* remorseful for the pain he has caused. The differentiation he makes is crucial: it is one thing to justify an action logically, as a means to an end, another thing to face the effect of that action. At that point of tension, we see the emergence of the third storyline, psychological, which enables a different and shared position for both parties as sufferers. We return to the implications of recognising each other's suffering as a key step towards finding a shared position, but, staying with the reflexive function for the moment, we can see how Pat's concluding statement "*it's so easy to lose sight of the enemy's humanity*" strikes as much as an admission or apology to Jo as a reflection to himself on what happens in conflict in general. Thus, this extract captures the interplay of the opposing forces of, on the one hand, the ever present potential of retrenchment into us and them and the positioning of other as the enemy and, on the other hand, the re-humanizing force of Empathic Mutual Positioning that returns humanity to the self and the other.

The following exchange between Jo and Pat poignantly illustrates this point:

Pat (3357): you could be at funerals, and carrying coffins, and still <X there's X> you don't cry.

There's a

Jo: hmh

Pat: I don't know, because the moment demands some sort of, I don't know, er, some stoicism, it's, probably not the right word. but I can't just XX work still needs to be done. you know, and

Jo: hmh

Pat: let's just get on with it. but at what price? you know, what price?

Pat (906): you're nearly part and parcel of the problem, if you're not seeing a human being in front of you. if all you're seeing is an enemy and so it's, I think it's incumbent on us all, to, try and, understand, where the other person is coming from.

These poignant extracts make clear Pat's awareness that de-humanising the enemy, whilst being an efficient way of enabling a human being to carry out, through desensitisation, horrific actions when those actions are deemed necessary, carries a cost to the self. The loss of humanity pertains to the self too, as is explicitly illustrated in the first line, where Pat describes how he could not afford to be in touch with the grief of carrying the coffin of his fellow combatant. The realisation that the cutting off of humanity affects both parties is what Pat is coming to terms with when he asks "*at what price?*" We can only imagine the profound pain involved in the realisation that whilst trying to solve a problem of injustice and repression, the inevitable process of de-humanisation involved in armed struggle, made him "*nearly part and parcel of the problem*".

In the moment at which Pat enters this emotional terrain, Jo is there to sustain him and the process, through empathically and mutually positioning him as the victim, as the next two extracts illustrate.

Pat (2872): [...] and after each meeting (1.0) I gained something from the encounter.

Jo: hmh

Pat: I don't know if you can call it an encounter. perhaps it was an encounter the first time,. after that it was an exchange. or a meeting. whatever. but the whole experience has been so, I think beneficial to me. and,. I'm hoping for you. ehm,

Jo hmh

Pat and ,. it's actually put me in touch with, this, suppose, my own feelings, about the past.

Jo and when you describe I <X knew X> you have, shared with me the whole story of that experience. and, when you describe that, it's totally understandable the steps you took, and many, many would, and I can't judge you,. I don't judge you,. it's more an awareness of, the similarities.

[...]

Jo the less, I am seeing you, as the perpetrator and, the more, I am seeing you, er, someone who's had, a lot of struggle, and a lot of reasons to do what you've done.

Jo if we can talk now,

Pat hmh

Jo (995) and if I can understand, what it is that, drove you to violence. and I can hear it. I have parts in me that don't want to listen.

Pat hmh

Jo and yet, I can listen. and I can understand. your oppression. and, and the suffering. and the injustice.

In the first extract, Pat is explaining why the conciliation has been beneficial to him as a person, rather than as representative of the republicans. It is not just Pat's self positioning that has expanded through the process of conciliation, but his needs too. He is no longer in touch exclusively with his political needs; his personal and emotional needs have now been brought to the surface and strengthened.

We can see how Pat's needs changed and evolved through the process of conciliation; Empathic Mutual Positioning has allowed him to expand and to embrace, not just different understanding of the other, but also of himself and his own needs, for example by reconnecting with repressed feelings about the past. Still, even during such soul searching moments, he never loses sight of what Jo might be experiencing and checks with her: *"the whole experience has been beneficial to me and I'm hoping for you"*. This is a good illustration of Empathic Mutual Positioning as an inter- and intra-psychic process.

The Other is crucial in many respects in the conciliation process. Firstly, the speaker needs the Other to listen to their story and the listening has to take place across the many divides of different identities, histories, needs and positions:

“to enter actively into another individuality, another perspective on the world – without losing sight even momentarily on one’s unique perspective, one’s own ‘surplus’ of life experience, one’s own sense of self” (Valentino, 2005, p. 3, cited in Cameron, 2011a, p. 8).

In other words, the Other has to remain *other* for empathy to emerge. As Halpern and Weinstein (2004, p. 568) argue, what takes empathy beyond sympathy is differentiation of Self and Other: “imagining and seeking to understand the perspective of another person when that perspective may be distasteful or lead to emotional ambivalence.”

This is exactly what Jo illustrates in both extracts. It must have been extremely difficult to hear that Pat still thinks her father’s death was necessary: “*what was done needed to be done*”, yet by making the gesture of listening to Pat’s story, she can understand why Pat did it and how he arrived at that point. That fundamental recognition returns dignity to Pat, but also re-contextualises and makes some sense of Jo’s father’s death, helping the healing process.

Jo (3687) and, what happens is that, as,. as we're talking, and as you share, from that, deep part of you, that you have been sharing, and, and, you know, there's something, something, something happens to me at the same time. and, healing happens .

The process described by Jo mirrors the gradual change in Pat and illustrates the dynamic nature of conciliation. It is thus through empathic positioning – i.e. seeking to understand the perspective of the other – and through this being done mutually, that reconciliation is fostered and sustained

Foreshadowed by Jo allowing Pat to use her metaphor of healing (Cameron, 2011b) we conclude with a deeply moving extract in which Jo makes the ultimate empathic gesture in the process of Empathic Mutual Positioning of offering Pat the position of victim and apologises for the ways in which “her people” have contributed to the persecution and oppression that Pat and “his people” suffered.

Jo (3809): as, an English woman, as the daughter of an English MP, who was part of Thatcher's government, is to say, I'm sorry, for what,. we've done. and that's, is not coming from guilt, or, weakness. but from just the recognition, and an, and owning, how, the English have contributed, to the persecution, and the oppression.

By offering her position of victim to Pat, Jo relinquishes her right to the higher moral ground that being the victim would allow her; in return, it enables her to meet Pat

as equal in the shared humanity. We can see how this shift is also experienced by Pat when he talks of how his first meeting with Jo was an encounter (implying meeting somebody 'Other') and how this changed to an exchange (a meeting of equals).

Discussion

Empathy and (re)conciliation

Cameron (2011b) paid close attention to the fine grain of interactions in conciliation conversations. From analysis of the metaphors used and of the discourse activity, Cameron extracted what she called 'gestures of empathy' to trace the emergence of empathy from local activity through continuously accumulating understanding and through sudden revelations or changes (2011b, p. 177). She argues that this process is always dialogic and that emerging empathy is to be understood in terms of connecting with the Other, through three categories of gestures of empathy: gestures that allow connection across the gap between Self and Other; gestures that assist in entering into the Other's perspective by imagining their world; gestures that realign speakers and support a shift in perceived relations between Self and Other.

This paper has proposed the new notion of Empathic Mutual Positioning to describe a key dynamic force in reconciliation whereby the participants do something specific in their mutual positioning that goes beyond the ordinary offering of and taking up positions for themselves and the other. By examining gestures of empathy in the conciliation process through Positioning Theory, this paper adds an exploration of the *effects* of 'Empathic Mutual Positioning'.

In the process of Empathic Mutual Positioning, multi-layered identities and emotional states are revealed, negotiated and shifted. In this sense mutual empathic positioning is an inter and intra-psychic process. We propose that the capacity (as a psychological process) and willingness (as intentional commitment to reconciliation) to allow contradictory positions for oneself and the other through Empathic Mutual Positioning is core to the process of conciliation and as such constitutes a progressive social act. We argue that it is through Empathic Mutual Positioning that new mutual recognition and reconciliation is made possible for both speakers. As such, Empathic Mutual Positioning could be used as a strategic approach to conciliation by mediators engaged in reconciliation practice.

In this section of the paper we first discuss in detail the characteristics of Empathic Mutual Positioning and its effects. We then reflect on the challenges and potentialities of applying it as a method of conciliation; i.e. how mediators could foster empathic understanding and gestures of empathy by promoting and supporting Empathic Mutual Positioning in situations less ideal than those pertaining to Jo and Pat.

Firstly, the dialogue between Jo and Pat has exemplified the fundamental role of Empathic Mutual Positioning as an *intentional commitment* to conciliation through dialogue in scaffolding a process that is otherwise constantly under threat of collapse. In this sense, Empathic Mutual Positioning operates as a force. But it is also a *dynamic psychic* (intra and inter-subjective) *process* in that it changes the people involved while unfolding, and paves the way for further changes. Depending on the situation and the actors involved, intentional commitment to conciliation and psychological openness might be present from the start or might come into being through the process of conciliation itself; it might be stronger at some point and weaker at others depending on internal, social and relational factors. As such, Empathic Mutual Positioning is an essentially dynamic force as well as a psychic process.

Secondly, Empathic Mutual Positioning illustrates how the Other is crucial in many respects in the conciliation process. Primarily, the speaker needs the Other to listen to their story and the listening has to take place across the many divides of different identities, histories, needs and positions:

This implies that, crucially, the Other has to remain *other* for empathy to emerge. As Halpern and Weinstein (2004, p. 568) argue, what takes empathy beyond sympathy is differentiation of Self and Other: “imagining and seeking to understand the perspective of another person when that perspective may be distasteful or lead to ‘emotional ambivalence’”.

Part of the otherness of the Other lies in their different and potentially irreconcilable needs. Therefore, the third characteristic of Empathic Mutual Positioning is that it allows an acceptance of differences in the parties involved. Pat needs to be given the chance to explain what brought him to his violent actions in order to rectify misrepresentations of himself and other republicans (what we have called here a need for a more expansive and complex positioning for himself). Through mutual empathic positioning he also engages in a psychic process of getting in touch with and working through his own emotional needs. Jo, on the other hand, is driven by a need to make sense of the tragic loss of her father, and needs to hear Pat’s story. Through these differences and the uneven use of the three storylines by Jo and Pat, we can see that their starting points are asymmetrical. The stark asymmetry in terms of both positions and needs between the two speakers is never abandoned. In fact it is precisely this fundamental difference in positioning that requires empathy for conciliation to take place. Empathic mutual positioning is the process through which both speakers offer and facilitate for the other the taking up of positions that are difficult and painful for themselves and move together to a different understanding and joint meaning making.

It is important to reflect further on this quality of the conciliation as a dynamic and evolving process. Jo overwhelmingly and consistently uses the psychological storyline

to speak of grieving, psychological pain, emotional healing, thus revealing her overarching need for finding a resolution to her grieving. Pat's positions are multiple; as a perpetrator he uses the legal storyline to acknowledge the crime he has committed and recognise Jo's position as the victim of his crime, and a political storyline to describe his former affiliation to the Irish Republican Army and his position as combatant, but also to position his role in the armed struggles as in solidarity with members of the working class and as a fight to stop injustice and oppression. Pat also takes up the psychological storyline, but intermittently, while returning to the others to attend to the loyalties to the republican cause and to himself as needing to rectify misrepresentations of his acts. Because of the contradictory nature of selves and their conflicting cognitive and emotional connotations, conciliation cannot be achieved once and for all, but it has to be continuously revisited and strengthened. This suggests that Empathic Mutual Positioning as intentional commitment to conciliation and psychological openness does not have to exist from the start, but it can come into being through the process of conciliation itself.

In line with Cameron's dynamic model of empathy (Cameron, 2011b; 2011c), we are suggesting that Empathic Mutual Positioning is a composite of what is there at the beginning (at a minimal level, a willingness from the individuals involved to engage in the process), what develops as the conciliation progresses and trust grows, and what emerges as a joint production from the participants involved.

We have presented an example of successful conciliation as a case study. However, Jo and Pat are unusual in many respects and their relationship very rare. It is worth reflecting on what makes this particular process of conciliation unusual as it may help identify potentially fruitful openings in less ideal conciliation scenarios.

Firstly, the process of conciliation was started by Jo as part of her journey of grieving for her father's death. This suggests the need for some level of emotional preparedness for conciliation, for at least one of the actors. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela mentions the double bind of hatred and resentment in, on the one hand, connecting the victim to the lost loved one but, on the other, as a burden that "denies the victim the chance to come to terms with what has happened" (2003, p. 96). For the perpetrator, she sees as necessary to have evidence of remorseful regret and a commitment to future peace (2003, p. 138). In this sense, the post-apartheid reconciliation processes in South Africa provide examples bearing similarities to what happened between Jo and Pat, in so far as we conceptualise Empathic Mutual Positioning as a psychosocial attitude and commitment to peace and reconciliation, both for themselves as individuals and for others through the prevention of future violence and overcoming of past traumas.

Secondly, when Jo contacted Pat, her effort was met by the other party, thus

highlighting the importance of timing. However, considering the unconscious aspects of conciliation, it is not always possible to gauge whether the moment is right as the actors themselves might not be fully aware of their readiness and willingness to start the conciliation process. This was certainly the case for Pat. For this reason we conceptualise Empathic Mutual Positioning, as well as being intentional, benevolent and asymmetrical, as dialogic because it emerges from the interactional process. It might initially come primarily from one individual, but comes to be a property of the interaction of both participants. In this sense, Empathic Mutual Positioning is intrinsically relational, although this might not be evident at the beginning of conciliation. It cannot be broken down to individual parts and is bigger than the sum of its parts; it does not belong to individuals but emerges from the dialogic process.

The third feature of the presented case study is that the conciliation developed without mediation or facilitation. This is perhaps the most striking and unique characteristic, but it is not a necessary condition. We have described Empathic Mutual Positioning as a state of mind, of mindfulness of the other without losing oneself. This sophisticated and delicate balance finds expression in gestures of empathy, in the careful and repeated acknowledgement of how one's words might affect the other and in the recognition of differences in position. As Empathic Mutual Positioning is acted through the gestures, it in turn supports the process. But such attitudes can also be held, demonstrated and sustained through facilitation from a third party when the process is in danger of collapsing. In this sense we suggest that initiating, supporting, and facilitating Empathic Mutual Positioning can be used by mediators as a strategic approach to conciliation.

The benefits of Empathic Mutual Positioning go far beyond the individuals involved in conciliation. The attitudinal climate induced by mutual empathic positioning affects not just the local interaction, but the whole relational landscape and conditions actions by generating safety in dialogue. If we consider identities as forces - in this case oppositional forces that constantly threaten to pull Jo and Pat apart and entrench them in their original positions – Empathic Mutual Positioning is the force that brings them together, with and beyond their differences. It is precisely this intentional stance that makes Empathic Mutual Positioning the sustaining force in the conciliation process. Clinicians involved in psychodynamic work know that the regressive forces pulling towards paranoid defensiveness and splitting of the world into good and bad (Klein, 1946), never go away and have to be constantly reckoned with. Similarly here, the empathic intentionality and the commitment are essential to counteract the opposing forces and foster conciliation. This does not mean that the commitment to the process of conciliation is untroubled. Rather, conciliation is likely to take place in a context of intra- and inter-psychic conflict.

Implications for peace-building and conflict transformation

The empathic process we are describing here chimes with many aspects of what in conflict resolution / transformation is known as the P-I-N (Positions, Interests and Needs) model of reconciliation, used by mediators trying to bring together people from opposing sides in conflict. The P-I-N 'iceberg' model is sometimes illustrated through two pyramids which at the top are distinctly separate, but overlap at the base, or as the concentric layers of an onion (Fisher et al., 2007), see Figures 1 and 2. The top or outer layer contains *positions* that people in conversation take publicly; underlying these are *interests*; i.e. what people want to achieve from a particular situation. Finally, at the deepest part are the most important *needs* that people require to be satisfied. In a conflict resolution situation, as levels of trust rise, people may become able to work through their positions and identities to reveal more of their needs to each other, whilst gaining increased awareness of their own needs.

According to the P-I-N model, positions are always self-oriented and appear as a solution to the speaker. They are always made clear and stated over and over. For example, following a fight for independence, parties in conflict, when meeting for reconciliation might insist: 'I want my nation to be recognised' or 'I want your army to leave my country'.

Interests underpin positions, are more personal, and are rarely stated when former combatants or enemies come together in conciliation because they would make the speaker vulnerable. For example, 'I want my nation recognised *because I don't want to feel a second class citizen*' or 'I want your army to leave my country *because I don't want to be randomly picked up and thrown into prison or beaten up*'. They are held to be the reason behind the positions that people adopt, and are wider and deeper, but they express 'wants' rather than needs.

Needs lie much deeper and are held to be much more fundamental (e.g. survival needs are what people literally cannot live without, both physical and psychological; need for security, to live without fear, or for access to food).

The onion analogy (Figure 2) illustrates the goal of peeling away as many as possible of the layers that build up as a result of conflict, instability and mistrust in order to meet the deep needs underpinning individual and group actions (Fisher *et al.* 2007, p. 27-29), whilst the double pyramid in the iceberg model captures the deeper nature of needs, but also illustrates, through the overlapping of the base (needs), that despite the separateness and seemingly unbridgeable nature of positions and interests, there is a shared base of humanity. The P-I-N model graphically describes the process through which, in a conflict resolution situation, as the levels of trust rise, people may become able to work through their positions and identities to reveal more of their needs to each other, whilst gaining increased awareness of their own needs and their shared base of humanity.

Similarly, we also propose that individual positions, and differences between positions and underlying interests, should never be denied but paid close attention to. Hence recognition of original positions (victim-perpetrator; freedom fighter; member of the establishment etc.) and underlying interests (Pat's need to rectify misrepresentations and be heard; Jo's need to make sense of her tragic loss and emotionally heal) is crucial, but may have to be put to one side to get to the underlying needs, which are often overlapping and shared human needs. Thus Empathic Mutual Positioning captures the intentionality and commitment to meet one's own and the other's needs to be recognised, given a voice, listened to, and make reparation. The P-I-N model postulates that most of the time fear and distrust traps each party in their positions. When Empathic Mutual Positioning is in action, each speaker can repeatedly show the other their continuing commitment to the process and to meeting them in the process, however painful and complex that might be, and the trap is avoided.

It is this dynamic quality that makes the application and fostering of Empathic Mutual Positioning a potential method for the practice of reconciliation. Recognition of the important role played by Empathic Mutual Positioning could lead mediators to step in at times when resolve falters. Mediators can encourage, support or exploit Empathic Mutual Positioning to scaffold the process and support participants when it gets difficult for them to take and hold this empathic, intentional stance. Thus, the Empathic Mutual Positioning that at times cannot be practiced by the participants in the conciliation process can be held or embodied by facilitators or mediators. The role played by the mediator is paramount here and its relationship with the parties in conflict has resonances with the therapeutic working alliance, which refers to the collaboration established between a psychoanalyst and the mature ego, or reasonable part of a patient, to overcome together the blocks to change and the healing process (Freud, 1965; Sandler, Dare and Holder, 1973).

This suggests that Empathic Mutual Positioning is most effective in conciliation situations between individuals, but further research could explore whether and how it could also be applied in group settings. Gobodo-Madikiszela (2003) points out that often taking away the individual from the group is necessary for conciliation to start, both because of the individual's need for time and reflection following the violence, and because compassion and regret are individual processes. She reminds us that "our capacity for such empathy is a profound gift in this brutal world" (2003, p.139). Through the application of Empathic Mutual Positioning mediators can harness the universal human capacity for empathy, to scaffold and bolster processes of reconciliation and conflict transformation.

Notes

¹ In this reference to ‘that past’, we assume Pat is referring mainly to his affiliation to the IRA and his activities during that time.

² personal communication, May 2011

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