

6 | *The Micro-sociology of Peace Talks*

This chapter introduces the micro-sociological lenses to the study of peace talks: How can micro-sociology add to the study of peace diplomacy? Based on video data, participant observations, and interviews with diplomats and negotiators from Colombia/FARC talks, the Philippines/CPP talks, Kosovo/Serbia talks, and Ukraine/Russia talks, the chapter discusses how bodily and facial interaction shapes peace diplomacy and its potential for generating social bonds between participants. The chapter maps six different spaces in peace diplomacy: formal negotiations, informal space, formalized informal space, shuttle diplomacy space, press conferences, and virtual space; and how these different spaces shape the character and dynamics of interaction possible in peace talks. The chapter shows that under the right spatial and interactional circumstances, the interactions in peace talks can generate and strengthen social bonds between the involved parties. However, many peace negotiations and diplomatic exchanges do not take place between the leaders of respective groups or countries but between their representatives and, hence, the friendly relations potentially emerging between the representatives may not change the overall relations. The chapter therefore discusses the issue of the social-bonding-generating actions taking place between negotiators and often not the respective leaders or hardliners in each party. The chapter further discusses the importance of interpersonal trust versus trust in the process and in the other party in more abstract terms, as well as how the social bonding potentially being generated at the peace table is translated and transferred to the larger web of conflict-affected relations in society at large.¹

¹ Elements of this chapter were previously published in Bramsen, I. 2022a. "Transformative Diplomacy? Micro-Sociological Observations from the Philippine Peace Talks." *International Affairs* 98, no. 3: 933–51, by permission of Oxford University Press.

Literature on Peace Talks

Peace talks differ from other talks and negotiations in that they are often more intense, aimed at ending or preventing a violent conflict, and hence not just focused on negotiating an agreement but also in the process aiming at softening up tense relations. Peace talks also often differ from most other negotiations in being facilitated or mediated by a third party (Jenshaugen et al. 2022). In the case of civil society dialogues at Tracks 2 and 3, such third parties often come from mediation organizations like NOREF, CMI, Swiss Peace, Humanitarian dialogue, or Conciliation Resources. At Track 1, the third parties are often countries like Norway or Qatar, or international organizations like the UN, EU, ASEAN, or AU (Lehti 2014; Wallensteen 2011b). Whereas Chapter 5 focused on civil society dialogue and mediation (Tracks 2 and 3), this chapter will mainly focus on elite negotiations (Track 1). In Track 1 mediation, the mediator is often a politician or top diplomat taking up the position as special envoy or special representative. While the chief mediator is frequently promoted in the media as the person behind a given peace deal, mediation is usually an effort by a larger mediation support team leading different negotiations and organizing the talks.

Peace mediation research has primarily centered on the frequency, strategies, styles, and outcomes of mediation (Aggestam 2016; Kriesberg 2007; Wallensteen and Svensson 2014), including how the success of mediation efforts depends on the ripeness and intensity of the conflict together with the nature of the conflict (Svensson 2020; Wallensteen and Svensson 2014; Zartman and Berman 1982). Likewise, the literature has investigated the pros and cons of having a biased mediator (Svensson 2014), the responsibility of the mediator (Jenshaugen et al. 2022), and the inclusion of women, civil society, and marginalized groups (Aggestam and Svensson 2018; Paffenholz and Zartman 2019).

Due to the confidentiality of peace diplomacy and, hence, the limited access for researchers, it is primarily investigated through secondary sources, such as interviews and biographies written by diplomats and politicians (Pouliot 2016). Exceptions to this are found in the study of peace mediation (Kingsbury 2006), diplomacy (Neumann 2007; Riles 1998), and Track 2 mediation (Kelman 2010). These accounts are often conducted by scholar-practitioners or diplomats engaged in diplomatic practices as mediators or diplomats rather than as mere

observers or, alternatively, by journalists, who are allowed to hang around in the corridors (Corbin 1994). This chapter is therefore unique in terms of the manner in which it builds on micro-sociological, direct observations of peace diplomacy efforts from the Philippine peace talks (2017–2020) and video recordings of the 2012 talks between Serbia and Kosovo. Likewise, the chapter builds on interviews with Syrian and Yemeni mediators and parties to the conflicts as well as Colombian mediators and parties to the conflict. Interviewing parties to the conflict rather than merely the mediators responds to what Swedish Professor of peace research Isak Svensson (2020) has referred to as missing in the literature on peace mediation.

The Micro-sociology of Peace Talks

From a micro-sociological perspective, peace talks are not just about talking; they are just as much about micro-situational elements, such as the rhythm of interaction, the constellation of actors, and the importance of being in the same room with one's opponent. The core of the micro-sociological argument is that when diplomats meet physically in a space that allows intense, focused, and engaged interaction, it becomes possible to transform their relationship. Many of the arguments about dialogue and conflict transformation put forward in Chapter 5 also apply to peace talks, but the settings and the whole setup of negotiators representing their country or organization differ, and peace talks are therefore often characterized by a different set of dynamics worth exploring in this chapter.

Scholars have recently come to focus on the face-to-face dimension of diplomacy. Analyzing micro-dynamics of emotions and interaction, they have shown how face-to-face diplomacy is important when reading the intentions of one's opponent (Wong 2016), building empathy (Holmes 2018; Holmes and Yarhi-Milo 2017), transforming relationships (Wheeler 2013), and generating trust (Wheeler 2018). Several of these studies focus on cognitive elements of face-to-face diplomacy in terms of reading intentions (Wong 2016) and obtaining better comprehension of the other party's perspective and intentions (Holmes and Yarhi-Milo 2017). While recognizing the importance of the cognitive element, the micro-sociological approach instead focuses on the generative aspects of opponents falling into each other's rhythm.

Holmes and Wheeler (2020) do an excellent job in integrating Collins' model of interaction ritual into the study of diplomacy. They theorize diplomacy and peace talks as an interactional process with the potential to generate social bonds, even between former enemies. Drawing on examples such as the meetings between Reagan and Gorbachev, Holmes and Wheeler argue that the main factor determining the degree of social bonding is not the personal characteristics of the actors involved in the diplomatic meeting but rather the nature of the interaction. Put simply, it is not "who the leaders are that matters, but rather variation in how they interact" (Holmes and Wheeler 2020, 136). Adding real-time empirical substance to the Holmes and Wheeler argument, this chapter emphasizes the importance of the body, the spatial setting, and constellation of actors in shaping the micro-interactions of peace negotiations.

Micro-sociality and the Body

Bodily copresence, a central ingredient in Collins' model of interaction rituals, is of great importance for generating social bonds in peace diplomacy. This corresponds to Väyrynen's theorization of "embodied micro-practices of peace" (2019, 158). Importantly, diplomats and heads of state participating in peace diplomacy meet physically in the same location and sit face-to-face at a table and for brief moments even hand-in-hand in a handshake. They can "bump into each" other in the breaks or stand shoulder-to-shoulder while smoking (Bransen and Hagemann 2021). Researchers have shown how reconciliation after street violence often involves physical contact, like patting each other on the shoulder, shaking hands, or even hugging (Lindegaard et al. 2017). Some elements hereof may also be at play in diplomatic practices.

In the Philippine peace² talks between the government and the communist party (CCP) that I observed in 2017, I observed the relatively frequent occurrence of friendly, physical contact between the parties, with the negotiators giving each other high-fives after a successful session,

² The conflict between the CPP and the Philippine government dates back to 1968, when CPP was founded. It is considered the longest running insurgency in Asia and has cost over 400,000 lives. The CPP-government talks have been on and off since 1986. The talks that I describe here began in 2016 (formally in 2017), although with backchannel talks from time to time. As described in Chapter 2, I observed the talks in 2017 for one week and was close to the backchannel talks in 2020.

standing shoulder-to-shoulder, shaking hands when reaching agreements, and putting their hands together to display teamwork. At one point, the crowd even shouted “kiss, kiss, kiss” when the two panel chairpersons shook hands on a signed deal. Although they did not comply, the incident indicates the inter-bodily dimension of rapprochement.

In general, the atmosphere in the 2017 Philippine peace talks was very light and joyful, with interactions being friendly in the sense of a rapid rhythm, responding appreciatively to each other’s comments, and a mutual focus of attention. The parties often laughed together and smiled at each other. For example, during a discussion about where the money for a land reform should come from, a government representative suggested that they “divide the revolutionary taxes” – and everyone laughed. Even when discussing wording, such as whether to write “with” or “by,” one party jokingly stated that “your original language is acceptable,” and everyone laughed (fieldnotes 2017). As described in Chapter 5, engaging in shared laughter comprises a particularly intense ritual with bodies falling into each other’s rhythm, a ritual that cultivates social bonds between participants (Collins 2004, 66). The following photograph (Image 6.1) illustrates a situation where the parties are laughing together at the negotiation table.

Along with the importance of bodily copresence, seeing one’s enemy’s face has long been seen as potentially transformative (Levinas 1969). In the Syrian constitutional committee, a UN-facilitated process that aims to reconcile the Syrian government and opposition in the context of the Syrian peace process, one participant described how sitting face-to-face with the government had a pivotal impact on their relationship: The first three days of the meetings, the



Image 6.1 Cheerful interaction at the negotiation table (OPPAP)

parties sat facing the same direction, but the third day the seating was changed so that the parties faced each other. She describes how “when we were facing each other, we were talking to each other and there was at some point in that specific day, more people were smiling at each other, more jokes were made—like somebody from our side said something, and then they actually laughed” (Interview by Hagemann and author 2020). Engaging with an enemy face-to-face, it seems difficult to uphold enmity over time, difficult not to return a smile with a smile, if even a cautious smile. In other words, peace talks can create a room where the micro-sociality characterizing human interaction can foster a form of approachment. While this is not translated immediately into agreements, it creates a more fertile ground for softening up positions (Bramsen and Hagemann 2021). In fact, the Syrian government refused to take part in several social activities with the opposition during the Syrian talks in Geneva. According to a UN diplomat who observed the talks, this was a deliberate strategy for the government exactly to avoid generating social bonds with anyone in the opposition (Personal communication 2022).

The face and body also play an important role for mediators. Mediators read participants’ body language to pick up on their engagement, dissatisfaction, or agreement with statements made by others. Careful attention to body language can guide mediators to whom they should be chatting with in breaks; who are the spoilers, who are bridge-builders. A skilled mediation team can use breaks and social time to speak to people to understand their red lines, but also to reshuffle who is being exposed to whom. In line with calls for paying attention to the corporal dimensions of diplomacy (Neumann 2008), one might say that diplomats negotiate with their entire body and that bodily actions (e.g., smiling, patting each other on the back or shoulder, or sharing a meal), all contribute to the reconciliatory potential of a meeting.

Having established the micro-sociological importance of bodily copresence and face-to-face contact, I will now unfold how micro-sociological dynamics differ in relation to the space of the interaction and the constellation of actors.

Different Spaces of Negotiation

The forms of interaction unfolding in peace talks are shaped by the topic being discussed and the relationship between the people involved,

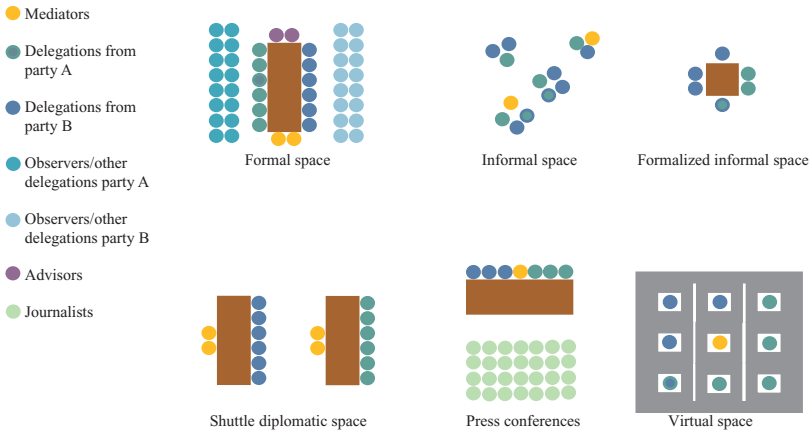


Figure 6.1 Spaces of peace talks

but it is also very much shaped by the space within which the interaction takes place, as the space sets the terms for the interaction and often determines the constellation of the people involved. In the following, I will unfold the micro-sociological dynamics of interaction related to six essential spaces of negotiation: (1) formal space, (2) informal space, (3) formalized informal space, (4) shuttle diplomacy space, (5) press conferences, and (6) virtual space. Each of these settings and constellations of actors fosters different forms of interactions with varying levels of formality and potential for approachment. The composition of actors in each space is illustrated in Figure 6.1.

Formal Space

The formal negotiation table is obviously at the core of peace talks, and mediators/facilitators often invest great consideration into how the tables should be arranged and where the parties should be seated vis-à-vis one another (Singer 2021). There is less of a clear divide between two parties when seated around round tables, whereas square or rectangular tables often have the mediator or facilitator at the end of the table and the parties along each side, often with civil society representatives, army representatives, lawyers, observers, advisors, and others seated behind each party as observers who may also assist the parties if needed (Figure 6.1). The distance between the parties at the table matters greatly to the type of interaction possible. If the table

is narrow allowing parties to sit face-to-face and within arm's reach, micro-sociology would predict a greater likelihood of the parties falling into each other's bodily rhythms, where it becomes difficult not to return a smile with a smile. Conversely, if the table is wide with parties sitting at a great distance, the interaction is likely to be more formal and stiff with less likelihood of opponents connecting.

Interactions at the official negotiation table generally tend to be more formal and "stiff." This stiffness is mentioned by the Colombian negotiator, Jaramillo. In an interview, Jaramillo expressed how: "a formal table with many negotiators and diplomats sitting around is inevitably stiff. You have the feeling that there is an audience and people tend to act accordingly" (Interview by author 2022). Besides the formal negotiation table with ten people along each side, the Colombian peace talks also featured other, more formal spaces that were nevertheless smaller and therefore enabled a different kind of interaction, such as a drafting committee involving three or four individuals from each side. Here, Jaramillo describes the interaction as "more intense, more frank" compared to the formal table (Interview by author 2022), which reflects the importance of the number of people engaging in the interaction, as noted by Simmel (1902).

In the Philippine peace talks between the communist party (CPP) and the Philippine government that I observed in 2017, the room was structured so that the main representatives and negotiators sat on each side of a table, facing each other, with the Norwegian delegation at the end. The larger part of the delegation was seated behind each negotiating team, rows of chairs sometimes becoming necessary. These delegations included civil society representatives, advisors, lawyers, military officers, and observers. While it is very inclusive to have various relevant groups present, if not at the table itself but at least in the room in which the negotiations are taking place, it also seemed to de-energize the mood in the room. In many ways, the delegations seated behind the negotiation table challenged the mutual focus of attention around the table, because they were not part of the main ritual. The constituencies were rarely actually called upon to provide input. Those who were not seated at the table and therefore not directly engaged in the talks often whispered to each other, looked at their phones, or appeared to be staring off into space. Moreover, they often even walked back and forth in the room, which disturbed the focus of the talks to some degree. My impression was that the



Image 6.2 Disengaged interaction at the negotiation table (OPPAP)

constituencies present constrained what could (not) be said in the talks, which was likely also one of the reasons why most agreements were ultimately made between the formal talks, in a more informal space, as described in the following section.

While much of the interaction at the formal peace table in the Philippine peace talks can be characterized as friendly and engaged, with participants laughing and nodding at one another, an equally (if not greater) aspect of the interaction was characterized by a slow rhythm of interaction, with parties looking away, at their phones, or whispering with one another, all of which contributes to disengaged interaction. Following Collins' micro-sociology (2004), this form of unfocused interaction de-energizes participants and is not fruitful for enhancing joint action.

Image 6.2 exemplifies less focused, disengaged interaction. Here, the majority of the representatives of the two parties have down-turned mouths, are looking down with half-closed or closed eyes, many of them hiding their faces or mouths behind their hands (Image 6.2). Even the observers sitting behind them are looking down, perhaps on their phones, and also have down-turned mouths.

Numerous times during the talks, I noted similar expressions: down-turned mouths, half-closed eyes, and a slow rhythm of interaction. Part of this disengaged interaction, I argue, is due to the stiffness of the interaction made possible by the formalized space.

Informal Space

Informal interaction is of critical value in peace talks, and the interplay between formal and informal interaction remains the recipe for building relations in diplomatic engagements (Nicolson 1969). Whereas

interaction at the *formal* negotiating table is often characterized by formal language and an “audience” in the form of constituencies, civil society representatives, lawyers, army representatives, and others observing the talks behind the negotiation table, *informal* interaction often assumes a different, more engaged and focused form. The interaction in more informal settings can be freer and more dynamic. Such interaction can take place spontaneously or in an unorganized manner in breaks over a cigarette or cup of coffee, but it can also be more organized, like at dinners, receptions, or gatherings at an embassy. The importance of sharing meals, coffee, cigarettes, and the like came out in almost all of the interviews that I have conducted with participants in peace diplomacy.³

For instance, a participant in the Syrian constitutional committee described how “the smoking outside . . . or the late-night chats outside, you know . . . these kinds of interactions can also evolve in informal ways, even taming people who don’t want things to proceed forward” (Interview by author and Hagemann 2020). She goes on to explain how, at a meeting of the constitutional committee in November 2019, she ended up sitting in a bus beside one of the government representatives, which enabled a more personal and direct form of interaction: “Oh, so you’ve been to the US? Which states have you been to?” (Interview by author and Hagemann 2020). Similarly, an informant from Yemen forcefully concluded that “food and wine is so important, you really can’t understate the importance of it . . . you can make people relax, talk about something else, find common reference points” (Interview by author and Hagemann 2020). Sharing food and the like is not only relevant for creating connections between conflict parties but also for establishing a relationship between mediators and the respective parties. For example, one mediator described how “in Yemen of course one of the best ways to meet people is through khat chewing. So, you meet with them when they sit together chewing khat—and those are very often very productive meetings” (Interview by author and Hagemann 2020).

In the Philippine peace talks that I observed in 2017, I observed how the negotiating panel deliberately capitalized on the potential for informal interaction during breaks. Whenever the parties reached a stalemate in the talks and were unable to advance on a particular issue, they

³ Some of which were conducted with Anine Hagemann.



Image 6.3 Coffee break at the third round of the Philippine peace talks 2017, at the hotel lobby in Rome (OPPAP)

called a break, which was often several hours long. Here, I observed how the two panel chairs often discussed over a cigarette outside the hotel, or the special envoy Elisabeth Slåttum and the parties had coffee together (Image 6.3). When the parties reconvened at the negotiation table, they would usually have solved the issue. This reflects how the type of interaction that is possible in breaks is productive for reaching agreements and increasing understanding between parties. Part of the reason relates to the great room for maneuver available in informal talks, where parties can speak more freely and suggest ideas without the “audience” in the talks listening and notes being taken. However, it also relates to the type of interaction possible when fewer people are engaged in focused interaction, with faster turn-taking, informal language, and mutual focus of attention – all key ingredients in Collins’ model of successful interaction rituals. When I asked about the dynamics in the breaks vis-à-vis the formal talks, the leading negotiator of the Philippine Communist Party (CPP) at the time tried to mimic the more back-and-forth dynamics of interactions that was possible in the breaks:

[W]hen you call for a break and discuss, you can ask: “What do you really mean?” And then you say: “Oh, that’s okay—it just came out differently” . . . if I say, “No more ceasefire!” then they will say if there’s no ceasefire, then nothing will happen. Okay. And then we say, “Let’s break for 5 minutes.” And they ask why we don’t want to have a ceasefire, and we explain: If there’s no movement in the release of political prisoners or on the agreements on Comprehensive Agreement on Social and Economic Reforms. And then they say [in a very soft voice]—“Oh, that’s OK. We’re going to release.” And then we can continue the discussion. (Interview by author February 2020)

Formalized Informal Space

To overcome the challenges related to the stiff interaction at the formal negotiation table, peace talks can also involve more informal space, although in a more formal manner than the breaks and dinners. Early in the Colombian peace talks between the FARC and the government, the parties created a format they called 2+2 (and later 3+3) in which the top two (subsequently three) representatives from each party would gather in front of Norwegian chief facilitator Dag Nylander’s residence to discuss issues related to the talks more freely, informally, and directly. The High Commissioner for Peace representing the Colombian government at the talks, Jaramillo, described how:

The rule was that you could talk about anything, and you could throw around ideas without actually making any commitments. You could even take back something you said. The point was to create a “free space” to brainstorm and rest each other out. You could say, “OK, well, you know, what would you say if we did something like this or that? Would that be something that you think might work?”. You could try dating or risky ideas and take them back if necessary — that kind of thing.” (Interview by author 2022)

Such space for more informal and engaged interaction was critical in reaching an agreement in the Colombian peace talks, as noted by Jaramillo: “It worked very well, we used it a lot” (Interview by author 2022). This shows how much the space or setup of the situation shapes the interaction.

The formalized informal space was also utilized in the negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo. In the documentary following the negotiations in 2012, it is visible how the parties hit a wall as to whether the agreement that they were working on could include a reference to a “line” or not. To overcome the stalemate, the mediator, Cooper, asks

the representatives of the two parties to go into a separate room and not come out until they have solved the issue. They agree to this and end up finding a solution so that the negotiations can proceed. Likewise, in the Serbia–Kosovo negotiations in the period 2013–2021, Catherine Ashton⁴ met with the prime ministers of Kosovo and Serbia for a series of dinners, and it was first after informal discussions that Ashton would ask, “Why don’t we write this down?”, thereby cultivating a very open environment for negotiations (Interview with Cooper by author 2022).

The formalized informal space allows parties to engage in a more direct, less stiff manner, and come to solutions that might have been difficult to reach in the formal negotiation space.

Shuttle Diplomacy Space

Another critical space in peace talks is the one-on-one meetings between the mediator/facilitator and the respective parties, which one might refer to as shuttle diplomacy space, shuttle diplomacy being the practice of going back and forth between two (or more) conflicting parties (Bramsen et al. 2016; Hoffman 2011). Most peace negotiations begin with the mediator or facilitator meeting each party respectively to hear about their concerns and objectives and to discuss the prospects of the peace talks. During negotiations, one-on-one meetings with the mediators are also crucial. In the shuttle diplomacy space, parties can sometimes be more honest, possibly revealing to the mediator what they are willing to agree to but not wanting the other party to know, as it is part of the bargaining process.

Whereas the Norwegian approach to mediation makes them refrain from direct engagement during the talks,⁵ the meetings that the Norwegian diplomats have with each party are also critical in the mediation process. Here, they can talk about potential

⁴ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the EU 2009–2014.

⁵ Norway is known for merely facilitating mediation efforts; they are responsible for all of the practical details in connection with the negotiations, they provide a suitable location and ensure that good food, coffee and tea are served, help to arrange the program for the talks, invite experts who can inform the talks on certain issues and, if needed, engage in bilateral meetings with the parties and shuttle diplomacy. Besides a welcome speech, their role at the actual negotiation table is limited to mere observation, albeit from the end of the table.

misunderstandings, possibilities, and concerns that each party has, and potentially nudge the parties toward agreement. For example, when troubles arose when a then-FARC military commander was killed and the talks were about to fall apart, the Norwegians and Cubans did backchannel, pendulum diplomacy, and assisted in easing tensions.

Some mediator involvement is limited to just one-on-one meetings with each party, leaving the parties to themselves in the direct negotiations between them. This was the model that the former EU Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ambassador Franz-Michael Mellbin, made use of when negotiating the peace deal between the Afghan government and Hezb-e-Islami, the Afghan militia. In this case, the benefit of the model was that the parties could speak Pashto together without it having to be translated to the mediator, but the main reason for applying this approach was that it allowed the mediator to tailor his approach to each party individually and to avoid coming across as partial:

I feared that if I had to sit in a room [with both parties at the same time], very quickly, almost no matter what I ended up saying, I would be understood as partial by one of the parties. As if I had chosen which side to support. I therefore suggested to not meet everyone at the same time, because that would be best for the process. (Interview by author 2022)

The micro-sociological dynamic in one-on-one meetings with parties is different than in mediation situations, because the mediator can be more direct and intimate with the parties and does not have to be attentive to balancing the approach to the same extent as in a mediation situation with both parties present.

Press Conferences

Along with the negotiation sites and informal space, press conferences constitute a critical space in peace talks. Peace talks are often followed by press conferences, where the parties respond to journalists' curious interrogations about the dynamics, content, and outcome of the talks and receive more or less precise answers. Press conferences can either be convened with each party, as seen in the talks between Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov and the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs in Turkey in March 2022 (MFA 2022), or with both parties at the same table in front of the media, as was the case in the

Philippine peace talks. A critical moment in peace talks that are often conducted in front of the press with pomp and circumstance is the signing of an agreement (or sub-agreement) together with a symbolic handshake to seal the deal.

While peace talks are often highly confidential, the Philippine peace process (2016–2017) was one of the most open peace processes to date. The media were constantly present at the venue (albeit not during the actual negotiations) and held numerous interviews with the party representatives along the way. Moreover, the press was invited to the opening session, the closing session, as well as sessions where the parties would sign agreements. Even agreements concerning the format of the peace talks rather than the actual conflict, such as the Supplemental Guidelines for the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC), were signed in public with the attendance of the press. The engagement with the press, I would argue, had an ambivalent impact on the talks; while the media presence energized the talks by heightening adrenaline levels and emphasizing the importance of the matters negotiated, the engagement with the press also nudged the parties to state and restate their opposing positions continuously and, in a sense, promise not to retreat from their ultimate goals. At the session signing an agreement in front of the press, the parties used the occasion to restate the need for bilateral ceasefire (the government) and the release of political prisoners (the communist party). Continuously restating these standpoints in public may make it relatively difficult for the parties to not gain their absolute aims in the talks and therefore make compromise more difficult. In this way, the media presence kept the parties entrenched in their opposing positions.

Virtual Space

The virtual space is increasingly applied in peace talks, either as a substitute or supplement to physical peace negotiations (Hagemann and Bramsen 2022). Similar to the space-related differences in physical meetings, different virtual platforms and setups in terms of the numbers of people involved shaped the dynamics of interactions in peace diplomacy. Nevertheless, the main focus here is how virtuality itself shapes interactions in peace diplomacy.

Besides being an interesting space in and of itself, the virtual space illustrates how critical physical meetings are due to the *absence* of physicality: screen-to-screen replacing face-to-face meetings. The

2020 Covid-19 lockdown gave researchers a unique opportunity to investigate this, with many mediation efforts being virtualized. Through twenty-one interviews with mediators and participants in mediation efforts in Yemen and Syria, Anine Hagemann and I sought to examine the impact of virtualization in peace diplomacy. Of “micro-sociological relevance,” we found that in online communication, many of the micro-sociological elements of interaction are obscured by the medium. Here, Collins’ micro-sociology helps to explain some of the differences in virtual versus face-to-face diplomatic encounters (Collins 2020b). One of the core ingredients in attuned interaction, *mutual focus of attention*, may be challenged by the fact that, apart from talking to each other and listening (in bigger meetings at least), participants also use the chat function offered by Skype or Zoom. For example, one informant described a civil society meeting where “sometimes there was someone writing on the chat, and this is making another noisy issue. You’re talking, and while you’re talking, someone is adding a comment to the chat” (Interview by author 2020). Likewise, the mutual focus of attention may be obstructed to some degree by the fact that people do not actually make direct eye contact, as they are watching their screens rather than looking into the camera (displaying the faces of the other participants). Likewise, people may be disturbed more easily by incoming emails or other notifications or distractions.

Following Collins (2004), attuned, friendly interaction energizes participants and generates solidarity between them. In virtual interaction, interactive dynamics are obscured, particularly when the video is poor or missing completely, it is highly difficult to establish such connection and therefore highly difficult to generate trust, empathy, and solidarity. As one Syrian mediator described: “When people don’t see each other, it’s very, very difficult to build empathy. It’s very hard to see if people are listening or not. It’s very hard to feel whether what you’re saying is getting approved by people nodding their heads or people . . . you know, shaking their heads, kind of with disapproval” (Interview by author 2015). For this reason, a Syrian member of the constitutional committee emphasized how she was glad the talks had been suspended during the corona-crisis, as they could not have taken place virtually: “The virtual world is very good for some things. But peace talks is not talking—peace talks is so much else. It’s the side talks that happen when you’re having coffee, bumping into people who you may not have wanted to bump into. It’s the cigarette breaks that a lot

of Syrians take, and it's being physically in the same place. The dynamics are very, very different" (Interview by Hagemann and author 2020). Similarly, a Syrian peace worker describes how "I couldn't hear in my heart, and I couldn't see the passion in the peace. I didn't feel there is a passion in moderating for the peace, which I felt when I was physically in Geneva ... so there's something—the sense of peace is missing. Whether we like it or not" (Interview by Hagemann and author 2020). Likewise, virtual interaction makes it very difficult for people to read the emotions and intentions of their opponents, and the same goes for the mediators: Deprived of the ability to read people's emotions through their body language, a mediator facilitating virtual diplomacy described how he has to "imagine the feelings of people, and that becomes something that you have to make an effort to do, whereas normally when we are facilitating, we pick up these things subconsciously" (Interview by author 2015).

Interestingly, several informants expressed how the lack of rhythmic interaction affected the possibilities for intense conflictual engagement. One Syrian interviewee described how: "I can't have the same, eh? ... what is it, like the same 'viciousness', maybe, if I'm getting into a fight with somebody as when they're right there in front of you—in your face" (Interview by Hagemann and author 2020). Likewise, another interviewee explained how "the threshold to kind of, you know, raise it [a conflict] and make it escalate, through body language by completely disagreeing or interrupting somebody. Or, you know, that kind of spiral of escalation that is usually quite mildly manageable, but there's a bit less potential there because people are sitting behind their screens and kind of waiting their turns, and it's a bit more disciplined" (Interview by author 2015). Like friendly interaction, conflictual interaction requires that parties fall into the same rhythm of interaction and become attuned, but now in animosity rather than solidarity. In this way, virtual communication seems to simply become less emotional, as summed up by one informant: "you have fewer opportunities to escalate, but you also have fewer opportunities for trust-building" (Interview by author 2015).

Another challenge with online interaction as reported by most participants is that, unlike face-to-face interaction, virtual communication is often emotionally and physically draining, both for the participants and facilitators of the dialogue. Whereas direct interaction can energize people, virtual interaction rarely has the same effect and often ends up draining them instead. One informant describes how "it's extremely

exhausting to sit in front of a screen for a whole day. . . . [T]he first couple of weeks I was excited to see how this would evolve. And now I'm just —'I can't take any more meetings'" (Interview by author and Hagemann 2020), while another interviewee elaborated how, "it's actually physically very draining, as well as emotionally when you don't have direct feedback about how people feel" (Interview by author 2015).

While virtual diplomacy falls short of generating trust and approachment in tense conflict situations, it may nevertheless prove useful to sustain trust in-between physical meetings (Hagemann and Bramsen 2022). Mediation processes are highly fragile, and the incipient trust generated in physical meetings easily falls apart between physical meetings, as the war continues on the ground following a very different logic. Negotiators and mediators therefore must reestablish the incipient trust at every new physical meeting. Virtual meetings can then continue the conversation, even if in a different format, and in this way contribute to sustaining the emerging trust in-between physical meetings. In the talks between Ukraine and Russia following the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, the two delegations met physically. But between the physical meetings, they reportedly met virtually on a "daily basis." While the talks later broke down, the practice of continuing the communication virtually between physical meetings is likely to become common practice in future peace talks.

The Explanatory Potential of Micro-sociology

According to Holmes and Wheeler (2020, 133), Collins' model of interaction rituals can explain "why some leaders are able to 'hit it off,' generating a positive social bond, while other interactions 'fall flat,' or worse, are mired in negativity." They develop and discuss an explanatory model for whether a particular meeting will be successful or not and look for predictors of mutual focus of attention, such as parties understanding how their own actions may play into provoking the fear and actions of the opponent (they refer to as Security Dilemma Sensibilities) (Ibid. 141). While I agree that the micro-sociological model is explanatory insofar as friendly interaction at the negotiation table would generate social bonds between participants, if only fragile, I would not argue that one can predict how a particular interaction will unfold assessing, for example, the parties' respective abilities to understand each other's fears (in fact, such understanding might exactly be

generated in the meeting itself). Numerous factors and chains of interaction rituals play into the equation of whether peace talks or international meetings will succeed; from interactions between soldiers on the battleground to intra-party dynamics. Likewise, many in situ dynamics shape the interaction and can change rapidly.

However, I would argue that micro-sociology can provide insights into which *conditions* are conducive for conflicting parties to soften up their positions and approach one another. The sections above analyzing different negotiation spaces outline some of these conditions. As outlined above, the spaces and (with them) constellations of actors differ in relation to how much they allow parties to have smooth, focused interactions as well as the extent to which they cultivate an openness to the positions of the opponent, as illustrated in Figure 6.2.

Analysis of the spatial conditions of peace talks can provide some input as to indicating (although not exactly predicting) the interactional dynamics of a given meeting. For example, one could compare the less formal setup at the meeting Russian and Ukrainian officials on March 3, 2022 (Image 6.4) with very formal setup at the Turkey–Russia–Ukraine Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting a week later on March 10, 2022 (Image 6.5).

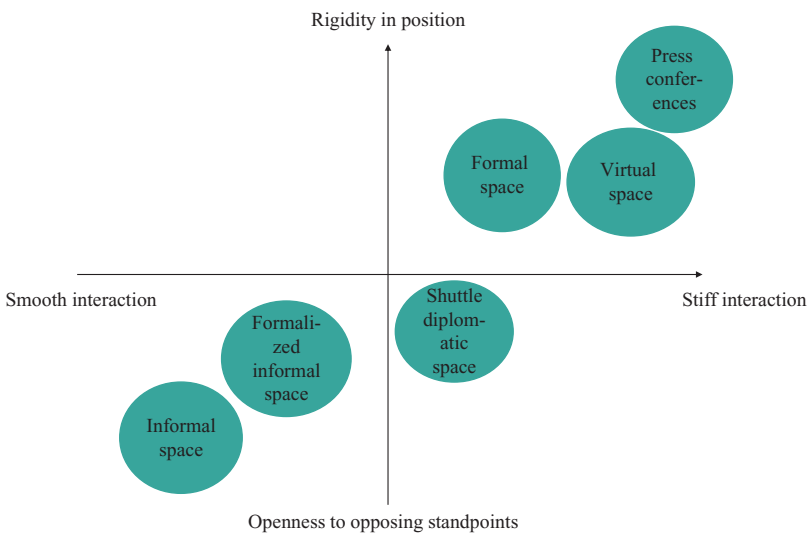


Figure 6.2 Degrees of rigidity and stiffness in peace talks



Image 6.4 Turkey–Russia–Ukraine Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting on March 3, 2022 (TT News Agency)



Image 6.5 Turkey–Russia–Ukraine Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting on March 10, 2022 (TT News Agency)

Looking at pictures from the meetings alone, and building on micro-sociological insights from other peace talks, one can surmise that the meeting between the foreign ministers seated at the big U-shaped table was significantly more formal, with a stiff rhythm

of interaction, whereas the meeting between the officials might have been more engaged and intense with more back-and-forth interaction and a greater likelihood of both intense conflict and potential for softening up positions. Conversely, at the virtual meetings between the two delegations from Russia and Ukraine, it is likely that the conversation has been stiffer, with risks of interrupting each other, poor connections obstructing the flow of interaction, and limited potential for approachment in the absence of physical copresence.

Besides spatial conditions, other factors can be seen as feeding into the equation of how dynamics of interaction unfold in peace talks. One such factor is the amount of time spent together (Bramsen and Hagemann 2021). Relations do not soften up overnight; it takes time – physical time spent together. Specifically emphasizing the importance of time, Colombian Chief Negotiator, Jaramillo describes how: “people in Colombia thought that the negotiations lasted too long. I think they lasted too long in political terms, in terms of political time, but I don’t think they could have been much shorter . . . because of this process you are kind of adapting.” Jaramillo explained how, over the course of the years, “unbelievable things happen,” for example, the FARC in the end agreed to a tribunal before which its commanders would need to stand and acknowledge the commission of war-crimes. For such a process of softening up positions, time is a critical factor: “You don’t get to agree to that over a weekend. You need to raise awareness of current standards and expectations and you need to soften people up. That takes a lot of time” (Interview conducted by the author 2022).

Even under near-perfect spatial circumstances and long periods of time spent together, it is by no means certain that peace talks will succeed. Peace talks are extremely fragile processes, and the task of overcoming enmity cannot be overestimated. Moreover, even if representatives at peace talks approach one another and soften up their respective positions, this may not change the broader relationship between the conflicting parties, as I will discuss in the following.

The (In)Significance of Interpersonal Relations in Peace Talks

My observations from the Philippine peace talks show that representatives build up social bonds and enjoyed friendship-like relations after several rounds of negotiations (Bramsen 2022b). This dynamic of

building relations over time was also visible in the Colombian peace talks, both in the clandestine phase (beginning in 2010) and the official phase (from 2012 to the reaching of an agreement in 2016).⁶ In an interview with Norwegian facilitator Dag Nylander, who was representing Norway (one of the guarantors of the talks, along with Cuba), he described how “there was a human-to-human understanding and friendly interaction between the delegations, who came to know each other over several years in Havana” (Interview by author 2022). While Nylander mentioned that there were also elements of “very strong personal conflicts and non-friendliness between individual delegates on both sides” and he would not exactly characterize the relationship as one of friendship, he describes how “the delegations increasingly came to feel that they were in the same boat and that they shared a form of common destiny” (Interview by author 2022). This is also supported by the Colombian government chief negotiator and High Commissioner of Peace, Sergio Jaramillo, describing how, as the negotiations proceeded, it increasingly felt “like a joint project.”

While crucial for the atmosphere at the negotiation table, the question remains: How critical are good relations and interpersonal trust between negotiators for the overall development of a peace process? Is it enough to have good chemistry and a good connection between negotiators in peace talks for the talks to reach an agreement? In the following sections, I will discuss these questions in relation to three aspects: trust, actors in negotiations, and the difficulty of transferring the approachment generated in peace talks to the wider public.

Trust

Several scholars have emphasized trust as being critical to peace negotiations, both as an outcome and emergent property of interpersonal interactions and bonding (Holmes and Wheeler 2020) and as a critical ingredient for reaching agreements and entering peace negotiations (Kelman 2005). In the Colombian peace talks, Norwegian special

⁶ The conflict between the FARC and the Colombian government began in 1964, when the FARC was established with the aim of fighting for social justice and challenging the Colombian government. Talks between the FARC and the Colombian government began in 2012 and continued until a peace agreement was reached in 2016.

envoy Nylander described how “trust and friendly interaction steadily increased throughout the process” (Interview by author 2022). Most remarkably, the chief Colombian negotiator, Jaramillo, already developed a “special relationship” with one of the top FARC officials in the secret phase of the negotiations. He describes how:

I could actually go and sit with him outside somewhere and have a coffee or go to a restaurant and have serious discussions, which were much more frank than anything else. So when they blew the ceasefire—which actually happened in his area of command—I was having lunch with him as we were bombing his people, saying, “OK—what are we going to do? We need to sort this out.” So that kind of relationship, which in the end is a relation of trust, is important. (Interview by author 2022)

However, Nylander interestingly states how this kind of interpersonal trust should not necessarily be conflated with a trust in the other side in more general terms: “I don’t think you should confuse that with trust in the other party or trust in the institution or movement that they represent” (Interview by author 2021). This points toward an interesting distinction between the interpersonal trust that can emerge through micro-interactions when sitting face-to-face and engaging in a focused, friendly manner, perhaps also informally, versus the trust in the overall party that the opponent represents. Similarly, Jaramillo makes a critical distinction between trust in people and trust in the process as a whole, stating that interpersonal trust is not the most important form of trust in peace negotiations: “You don’t trust people—you trust results. So the more you move forward, the more you jointly construct a process, and you reach agreements—it creates trust. But what you trust isn’t the other guy—what you trust is the process itself and the results you’re achieving” (Interview by author 2022). He exemplifies this with the confidential negotiations leading up to the official Colombian peace talks in 2016, where it was neither the personal chemistry nor interactional dynamics that were the most critical for building trust, but rather the ability of the FARC to not leak anything from the talks: “The fact that these guys didn’t leak the secret talks—you get the signal, ‘hmm, OK, they’re taking this seriously.’ And vice versa” (Interview by author 2022). This shows how some of the literature emphasizing interpersonal trust as the most important element in peace talks may be revised to include trust in the other party in a more abstract manner and, critically, trust in the overall peace process.

Actors

Whereas interpersonal conflicts can be transformed by friendly interaction restoring the relationship, the issue is much more challenging in conflicts between two groups of nations. The increased trust, respect, and understanding between conflicting parties may not be reflected in the relations within each party. Oftentimes, conflicting parties have factions that are more open to a peace deal versus others that are hardliners, possibly even against any form of deal. In the Philippines for example, parts of the Philippine government were very critical of the talks and highly reluctant of reaching any form of agreement with the communist party, the CPP. Likewise in Colombia, the chief Colombian government representative described how: “You’re negotiating with your own side all the time . . . and that was really hard, you know, sometimes harder than negotiating with the FARC. And people get very emotional and you have to be very disciplined and careful.” Hence, approachment between conflicting parties does not translate into a peace agreement if there is not enough coherence and/or too much resistance to peace within the respective parties.

A related problem of peace talks and diplomacy in general is that the friendly interactions promoting trust and social bonds often take place *not* between the leaders of the respective conflicting groups but between the diplomats and negotiators representing them.

For example, my observations from the Philippine peace talks reveal how friendly relations had developed between the respective negotiators, with joyful interactions on both sides, and both engaged and disengaged discussions but no conflict. Despite these friendly interactions, however, the talks broke down immediately after the round of talks in which I participated. Importantly, the friendly relations and trust built through these interactions were not between Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and the political leader of the CPP, José Maria Sison (Joma Sison), but rather between their respective negotiating teams. Duterte was not present at the talks, and Sison left most of the intense discussions to the negotiators. And in addition to Duterte’s absence from the negotiation table, his government hardliners were also not present. While this to some degree accounts for the good atmosphere in the room, it is also problematic given that the potentiality of approachment occurs between parties who already understand each other rather than between the actors who consider their counterpart to be an enemy.

Likewise, video recordings of the 2012 negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo show how Serbian representative Borko Stefanović faced several challenges with respect to finding support for the deal among the Serbian leaders. Just as the parties reached agreement on the deal, Stefanović receives new orders to renegotiate it, so as to avoid the use of the word “intergovernmental,” which leaves him in a back-and-forth debate with his government that leaves the Kosovan side waiting for six hours, after which they leave the negotiations to return the following day. The Serbian negotiator is very sorry about this, not least toward the mediator, pleading, “I’m sorry about this—don’t kill the messenger!”. He is clearly embarrassed the next day, and apologizes to the Kosovan negotiator, Edita Tahiri: “I apologize for yesterday, sincerely. I mean, it was beyond our ability to do anything.” Hence, the relationship that potentially developed between Stefanović and Tahiri, and even just the potential moments of understanding or agreement that are generated through the mediation process, are highly challenged by the fact that those bearing the primary responsibility for both countries are not present.⁷

These two examples illustrate one of the problems in diplomatic practices: that the important negotiations potentially generating social bonds and trust between participants often take place between *representatives* of the respective conflicting parties rather than the party *leaders*. Hence, while the trust generated in intense, friendly interaction may ease some negotiations and the crafting of deals, given that the negotiating representatives are constantly aware of and constrained by their constituencies and leaders, the importance of friendly interaction shaping the outcome of talks is often limited.

However, there are also interactional benefits to having lower-level negotiators engaging in negotiations. For example, negotiators can redraw the us–them lines of division between the negotiators vis-à-vis the leaders as opposed to between the conflicting parties (which are already there). In the situation described above, for example, where the Serbian negotiator returns with new requests, he adds how it is not with his goodwill that they are now trying to renegotiate the formulations: “This was the last thing we got last night, and that’s why it took

⁷ Later, the talks moved to the political level, where the prime ministers from Kosovo and Serbia met for several rounds with Catherine Ashton as the EU mediator.

so long. Because I was also trying to understand the nature of the problem, and I certainly was against trying to make any changes at the end, so ... but they insisted that we try to get rid of this word, 'intergovernmental.'" Interestingly, Tahiri, the Kosovan negotiator, replies to this with understanding, stating that "it's the same with us sometimes—with our government—so it's understandable." Hence, the two negotiators can bond over the fact that they both are under constraints from their respective governments, which softens up the very tense situation and adds another layer to the interactional dynamics of having negotiators engaging in peace talks rather than leaders. Likewise, Cooper, the negotiations mediator, described how the extra link in the chain of peace talks interactions can enable negotiators to put pressure on their leaders: "When Borko speaks to his people, he can say, 'look, I know that Edita has gone right to the limit of what her instructions are, and what she's proposing is actually quite sensible'" (Interview by author 2022).

Transferring Peace to Society at Large

Besides the challenge of translating the peace generated in physical meetings from the representatives present at the table to the leaders of their respective countries or groups, a major challenge in peace processes is to translate the approachment generated at the negotiation table to society at large (Bramsen 2023).

Former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton pointed this out in an interview. Here, she explained how she witnessed an emerging approachment in the relationship between the presidents of Kosovo and Serbia. After a dinner discussion, two officials entered the room, and she remembers thinking, "goodness me, how far we've come," as she reflected on their improved relationship. But also how "we need to make sure we take everybody else with us, because this isn't just about how individuals get on, important all that is, if underneath them, they aren't actually carrying with them people who see that this is about progressing on some very practical and important issues" (The Mediators Studio 2020). In other words, the agreement is unlikely to last if it is not understood and accepted by the broader public in the respective contexts. The key challenge in peacebuilding is therefore to transfer approachment produced at the negotiation table to the broader public. Since peace emerges

in “corporeal encounters” (Väyrynen 2019), a peace process would ideally involve physical meetings and dialogical encounters between everyone involved in the conflict. While this is obviously impossible, it illustrates the inherent challenge in translating and transferring the social bonds generated in peace talks to the broader web of societal relations. One way to include the broader society in a peace process is through referendums about the peace agreement. However, cases like Colombia show how this is also highly risky. From a micro-sociological perspective, referendums about peace agreements invite conflict interaction in the form of a “nocampaign” that can generate resistance toward peace and generate polarization in the very vulnerable situation in which a post-accord country finds itself (Bramsen 2022c).

In some cases, the problem is not only one of transferring the peacefulness generated in the negotiations to the larger public but rather an issue of the friendly interaction between elites in itself being viewed with great skepticism in the population, as elite rapprochement is considered an act of deception. In the case of the Kosovo–Serbia talks in 2011, the populace met the two negotiators with great resistance (e.g., people threw tomatoes at the Kosovan negotiator, Edita Tahiri) (Çollaku 2011). The assassination of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 by an Israeli ultranationalist due to his role in the peace talks and signing of the Oslo Accords is an extreme case of resistance against a peace negotiator (Freedland 2020). This shows just how fragile and challenging peace processes can be.

Conclusion

The chapter has shown how micro-sociology can shed light on the critical nature of micro-interactions in peace talks and how such interactions take different forms, among other things being shaped by the space within which they take place, from the formal peace table to the informal talks, press conferences, and virtual space. If peace talks allow enemies to interact, formally and informally, there is a chance that the micro-sociality of spending time together and engaging in a rhythmic, focused manner face-to-face will soften up the tense relationship. However, while negotiators can engage in face-to-face interaction that generates approachment and trust while softening up positions, this trust does not necessarily translate into trust in the overall process and the other party as a whole (i.e., not just the person). Moreover, this

transformative process of engaged interaction would often occur not between the leaders of the respective parties but rather between their representatives in the form of diplomats and negotiators. Hence, peace processes may well fall apart if the leaders or hardliners of the respective parties are not present in the talks. The complicating factor is that leaders will often only meet once lower levels have reached an almost-agreement to avoid losing face in a face-to-face meeting with an opponent without any direct results. This catch-22 therefore constitutes a critical challenge for peace negotiations. Likewise, the core difficulty in peace talks is to translate the approachment occurring at the negotiation table to the wider public having to implement and live with the consequences of a peace agreement.