CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Cross-Cultural Perspectives

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Of Nets, Nails, and Problems: The Folk Language of Conflict Resolution in a Central American Setting

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"I knew how to connect-in (*entrarle*) with my dad," Carlos said, "but my mother won't let me in (*no me deja entrarle*). I don't know her. She is totally shut (*cerrada*)." It was a typical muggy night in Puntarenas, a Pacific port town in Costa Rica. Carlos perspired as he explained the "situation" in his family to twenty of his fellow *Porteños*. We were all participating in a year-long leadership training course on "social empowerment" with a special emphasis on organizing groups and problem solving. He was in the middle of "sculpting" his family with members of the group, describing them as he went. Around his mother he placed the middle brother and his little sister. "We are six," he explained. "My mother is close with these two. They have their little group." He placed his father across the other end of the room, and then his oldest brother about in the middle of the two parents. The distance between his parents was obvious. At one point he said, "At times I just feel like telling them 'Mama. Papa. *Háblense!* (Talk to each other!).' " Finally, he put himself, the youngest of the brothers, close to his father. "The family is separated," he said. "Not one of the family group gives even a grain of sand to fix (*arreglar*) this situation. Each one is on their own, alone." Now it was the group's turn. "What counsel (*consejo*) would you give me, so that there would be an entry (*entrada*) in my family?"[1]

The two grandmothers in the group did not always speak, but tonight both had thoughts. Doña Fidelia said it simply, "If there is no love, there is no arrangement (*arreglo*). The family needs to be more *sincero* (open, sincere)." Doña Guadalupe gave Carlos a *consejo*, a piece of advice about his *llegarle* mother: "You have to *llegarle suavecito* (connect-in soft and

slow). Show her your love," she said. "Go to her with your heart in your hand."

It was Henry, however, who came up with the dominant strategy for the evening. "This is how I explain it. The mother is the trunk. The brothers and sister are the branches. Many times if one wants to get to (*entrarle*) the trunk, one has to go through the branches (*irse por las ramas*). It is not with the trunk that you start. Start with the brothers. Carlos needs moral support (*apoyo moral*). We all need moral support to be able to live. So talk to the oldest brother, *tú a tú* (one-on-one, intimately), tell him that you need it, make him see that you need this love and moral support."

Conflicts are, in every sense of the word, cultural events. They are perhaps one of the most intriguing and complex social accomplishments we humans construct. Situations like Carlos' call forth a lifetime of knowledge about what is right and wrong to do, how to proceed, whom to turn to, when, where, and with what expectations. Like Carlos and the group everyone must make sense of what is happening and decide how to respond. How this social phenomenon is understood and accomplished, however, varies from one cultural setting to another. The study of how people make sense of conflictive situations and appropriate "commonsense" methods of resolving them, including the use of third parties in a particular setting, might be called "ethnoconflictology." The present chapter is one contribution in this discipline, aimed at building our "common knowledge" about conflict in Central America.

The descriptions, ideas, and analyses that follow emerge from data recorded through participant observation, experiences in real-life conflicts, mediations, training seminars, and interviews accumulated during the past several years of travel and living in Central America, particularly in Puntarenas, Costa Rica. The town of Puntarenas sits on a narrow strip of land forming a peninsula jutting out into Nicoya Bay on the Pacific side of Costa Rica. The *Porteños* (people of the port) have known the boom and bust cycles typical of port towns throughout Central America. Like many port towns there are an array of "social" problems: prostitution, alcoholism, drug trafficking, delinquency, and unemployment. The training group known as Genesis was initiated in part to prepare leaders and respond to these community problems. The group was made up of people from the poorer *barrios* of the town, voluntarily participating in a course on social empowerment. Yet Genesis was destined to be more than a course. It was a combination of a "club of friends," a therapy group, and a training seminar.

The majority of the participants knew how to read and write, but had less than a fifth-grade education. There were grandparents, parents, and teenagers who brought their concerns and gifts to the group. Less

than half had any steady source of income. In fact most were squatters, living in one form or another of "land invasions." We met twice a week for over a year. The course was based on a participatory design in which members helped create both the goals for the group and the method of study and learning. Over the course of the year the group grew initially to more than thirty and then as the work proceeded decreased to a committed working group of about ten. In the meetings we not only explored the width and depth of personal, family, and community problems, but watched the emergence and management of numerous in-group conflicts. Genesis was a living laboratory of families, friends, and neighbors working on community problems.

This chapter describes native understandings of the conflict process through a study of their everyday "conflict-talk," permitting insight into folk ways of resolving problems and expectations of third party involvement. To clarify further, in most instances the specific language-variety-in-use is "talk about conflict" more than the actual talk used in conflictive exchange. Study of this type of talk is particularly useful to discover their ways of understanding and conceptualizing conflict. While the most detailed and in-depth observations of this "talk" came from the experience in Puntarenas, this language is common to many of the Spanish-speaking peoples of Central America, and this chapter will also draw from that wider experience to illustrate key points.[2]

TALK ABOUT CONFLICT: THE FOLK VISION

For some time I have been interested in the intersection of language and conflict behavior. As a mediator I was trained in "communication" problems and skills. As a sociolinguist I am convinced that language is not merely a "means" of communicating but an essential feature of the conflict experience. Discovered and carefully observed in everyday usage it can serve as a window into how social reality is constructed and understood.

Early on in my research in Central America I paid particular attention to how people, in their everyday language, talked about conflict. I began to notice that virtually nobody, and certainly nobody in our Puntarenas group, used the word "conflict" to describe their everyday disputes. As one *Porteña* noted, "Ah, no, here we don't have conflicts. Conflicts are what they have in Nicaragua. Here we have *pleitos* (disputes), *líos* (messes), *enredos* (entanglements), and *problemas*." "Conflict" is perceived as an academic term, and when used at a folk level refers primarily to violent, armed, intergroup struggles. At the same time a wealth of other terms and phrases describe the more common daily experience of conflict.[3]

CONFLICT: THE "NET" OF LIFE

Perhaps the term that best indicates and describes the folk concept of conflict is *un enredo*, or *estamos bien enredados* (we are all entangled). A simple translation, however, does not transmit the full significance of the term. This is a fishing metaphor in its roots. It is built around the Spanish word *red*, a fisherman's net. To be *enredado* is to be tangled, caught in a net. The image is one of knots and connections, an intimate and intricate mess. A net, when tangled, must slowly and patiently be worked through and undone. When untangled it still remains connected and knotted. It is a whole. A net is also frequently torn leaving holes that must be sewn back together, knotting once again the separated loose ends. Nothing describes conflict resolution at the interpersonal level in Central America better than this folk metaphor.[4]

"Interpersonal conflict" is perhaps a misnomer in this context. It leaves the impression that individual persons are in conflict. It fits a Western conceptualization permitting focus on individuals and their issues, often in isolation from their network. In Central America issues and people, and therefore conflicts, are always viewed holistically, as embedded in the social network. In my observations, the single most important characteristic affecting both the understanding and resolution of conflict is a person's network. *La red* is also the word for network, although in Puntarenas they more naturally would refer to it as *mi gente*, my people. Broadly this covers people who are well known to a person, usually friends, fellow workers, neighbors from the *barrio*, and most important, the extended family.

People here think in terms of families. For example, refugee camps, *barrios*, and housing projects are always counted in families, not individuals. They would rarely say, "one thousand people live in this neighborhood." It is almost always, from government officials to the person in the street, "two hundred families live here." The extended family often lives in close proximity, occupying various houses on the same block. The first time I had the car tuned, my mechanic and new found friend wanted me to see his house. As we walked down the block he pointed, "Here is where my brother lives. Here, my cousin. Here my mother with my sister. Here my uncle." When we got to his house he turned and smiled, "This is your house. You'll never get lost. Just make it to the neighborhood and asked for the Morales. Everyone knows which street the family is on." Time and again, little pieces of evidence underscore that Central America is familial in social construction, not individualistic.

Families and *mi gente* are the context in which conflicts, or the daily "entanglements" develop, are understood, and are managed. Around the experience of being in and dealing with these "entanglements" a

rich folk language had developed, characterizing both the conceptualization of conflict and the native processes for managing them. These terms are evidenced in the short description of Carlos' family and the group's response to him to which we now turn as a basis for our broader discussion.

THE "INS AND OUTS" OF CONFLICT

Recognition that a person is "in" a conflict usually comes with some form of the verb *meterse*. "I have been *metido*," that is, placed, put, introduced, or forced "into" a tangled net. In popular usage people often accuse others of "putting me in this problem." As Ruth said, in telling a story about a problem she had with a friend, "I told her, *vos me metiste en chisme* (you put me in gossip, got me in trouble)." It is not unusual, however, to hear that "I put myself in." *Meterse* also has the connotation of meddling and interfering. For example, before one of our meetings I was talking with Carlos and Minor, another member. We started discussing how we would "enter" Carlos' family to help. Minor shook his head. "It wouldn't work here, because here, the family is the family and nobody interferes (*se mete*). The family is closed (*cerrada*). It is very *porteño* to not *meterse* in family problems. That is the family's job." In all the cases, however, to be *metido* carries the recognition that one is now a part of, inside a larger whole.

Once *metido*, the search begins for "how to enter into the problem and the person" (*cómo entrarle al problema, y a la persona*). These concepts are more complex than simple "entry." The verb invariably is used in the form *entrarle*, and it is the *le* that points to the effort to get "into" or "inside of." *Cómo entrarle al problema* seems to be used in two ways. First, it is the question of how to gain access to the problem. This is foremost a search for the right connection, that is, for *la entrada*, which invariably is a person. In the description above Carlos' question about *entrada* invited discussion around whom to start with. Henry, for example, suggested that the entry with the mother (the trunk of the problem) is accomplished by entering first with the brothers (the branches). Notice here two important characteristics in this folk wisdom. First, the suggestion is to proceed indirectly, by going through other people and channels to reach one's objective. Underlying this is a sense that too direct an entrance may upset the balance and "close" the person. It is important to proceed in the initial phases "soft and slow" (*suavecito*). We then add the natural insight of *who*, in the family, is the correct person to approach first. In this case Henry, as did others in the group, suggested the older brother, who in many families has special responsibilities as a go-between and trouble shooter. The *consejo* offered here is based

on a sense of what is proper and traditional, both in terms of who is sought and how they are approached.

Second, *cómo entrarle al problema* is also the question of how to get "inside" in order to understand. Another common term accompanying *entrarle* is *compenetrar*, to penetrate into the other's world. In this conception if problems are to be understood they must be felt and seen from the "inside out." *Cómo entrarle a la persona* runs parallel with this latter idea. The basic question is both how to approach and then connect-in successfully with the other. Used interchangeably is the phrase *cómo llegarle*: how to arrive in the world of the other. Viewed in context, successful entrance into the person means we have spoken and understood, we have seen each other from the inside.

This understanding helps explain the prevalence and importance of the typical conflict "person-description" that someone is *cerrado*. Carlos' problem with his mother, and the difficulty the group experienced in giving him advice repeatedly came from the "closed" nature of his family. *Cerrado* is not so much that a person is stuck in a position, hard to negotiate with, or hardheaded, the term reserved for that is *duro* (a hard guy). It is specifically that they will not let you into their world, there is no entry, you cannot get inside. Notice how Carlos says his mother is "closed" and in the following breath, "I don't know her." If you cannot get inside people, you do not know them, you do not feel their world, nor do they feel yours. In the folk view, a closed person means that there is no way to "get into the problem" and no way out of the entanglement.

Accompanying this notion of how to "get into the problem" is the other side of the coin: how to get out. A common expression of the *Porteño* caught in a problem is the simple phrase: *"Cómo voy a salir de eso?"* (How am I going to get out of this?). "Resolution" involves the task of "getting out" (*salida*) of the entanglement. Consider, for example, another much used phrase for conflict that illustrates this point: *"Ay, el clavo que tengo"* (What a nail I've got). "Having a nail" could mean pain, something hard or sharp. As it has been explained in their terms, a nail, once driven "in," is very hard to get "out." The fundamental folk understanding: conflict is a process of "ins and outs."

"Getting out" usually has one of two meanings. It can mean pursuing a variety of avoidance tactics so that one is not forced to directly confront the problem or, more important, the person. The most common tactic is to simply cut off contact and not talk (*no se hablan*). This is experienced as separation, distant and painful, leaving holes in the net. Here people are "closed"; it is no longer possible to reach into the other's world. There is no entrance. This is Carlos' case, where, in his words, each is on their own, alone, denoting the feeling of isolation and incompleteness.

Or, it can mean the pursuit of "putting things back together" through an *arreglo*. It is to this latter process that we now turn our attention.

THE ETHNOMETHODS: GETTING FROM "IN" TO "OUT"

Getting from "in" to "out" involves three basic processes, the internal ethnomethods of "getting into the problem": *ubicarse* (get my bearings); *platicar* (talk, dialogue); and *arreglar* (manage, arrange, and fix). We might call them "ethnomethods" to highlight their taken-for-granted nature.

Ubicarse is to locate or situate something or oneself. For example, an advertisement will often give the *ubicación* of its business by listing the street address, or where it is located in relationship to other important buildings. It is not uncommon to hear someone say, "We are *ubicados* (living) in such and such a neighborhood." When people are lost in the city, they are *desubicado* (disoriented). *"Tengo que ubicarme,"* they will say. "I have to get located, get my bearings." The same feeling and terminology are used in social and group settings. For example, one of the *Porteñas* once talked about her experience in San José with a group of professors and diplomats. *"Me sentí bien desubicada,"* she reported. "I felt out of place." In the Puntarenas group we regularly made group decisions by using *la ronda*. In *la ronda* we went "around" the circle and each person in the group made a brief statement of how they saw the problem, what decision they wanted, or how they were going to vote. It was not unusual for people to struggle to understand what was being asked of them, what they should say, or how they should vote. We would often hear, *"Es que no me siento bien ubicado. De qué se trata?"* (I'm not sure what is going on. What are we talking about here?).

In an ethnomethodologist's terms, *ubicarse* is the process of "making sense" of something. *Ubicarse* is a folk term for the crucial process of "framing" something in order for it to become some "thing" meaningful. It is a particularly appropriate term given its metaphoric image of "locating oneself." For example, the "meaning" of an event, like Carlos' mother not greeting him when he comes home for a visit, is accomplished by "locating" it in a frame of reference along with other events and behaviors. *"Tengo que ubicarme"* (I have to get located) indicates a sense-making procedure is under way. The event at hand needs to be located so that I know where I am and can, therefore, decide where I should go. In this folk understanding, dealing with social interaction and particularly conflict, is like looking for a new address or being lost in the city.

The single most important way to *ubicarse* is through *la plática* (talk,

chat). *Platicar* is more than simply "talking"; it is a way of sharing, exchanging, and checking things out. It cannot be reduced to a technique because it is a way of being with the other. As an example, consider an experience with our landlord's hired hand in San José. Manuel is a Nicaraguan refugee, one of thousands undocumented in Costa Rica. He makes a living doing odd jobs, and has built a good reputation for being honest, which puts him in demand for housesitting when people go on vacation or travel. Soon after moving into our house, we went on a short trip and had Manuel housesit. Upon our return, I told him we would be traveling again and several weeks later he came by, as I would soon discover, to raise his nightly wage for housesitting.

He arrived at about 8:00 in the evening. We went through all the customary greetings as I invited the unexpected visitor in. Our conversation wandered through a variety of subjects: family, work, religion, and politics. He was curious about our religion. He listened patiently as I explained Mennonite theology. We talked at length about Nicaragua. We drank coffee. He spoke about his distrust of all politicians, the life of a "Nica" in Costa Rica. The conversation lasted more than two hours. Finally, Manuel stood and said, *"Me gustó la plática"* (I liked our talk), and we headed for the door. As he went out into the garage he turned and said, "Don Juan Pablo, look, if you need my services for watching the house it will be 300 colones a night." That effectively doubled his earlier price. We then proceeded to negotiate for another half an hour until we reached an *arreglo*.

In this instance, as in many others, *la plática* is a way of being with, of reaffirming the relationship, of preparing the way for dialogue. It is open-ended, and feels roundabout in nature. As Henry said, "Go through the branches" not directly to the trunk. *La plática* permits one to test the waters and *ubicarse*. It is through *la plática* that all important contact is made, and one "penetrates into" the world of the other.

La plática lies at a very important border in folk categorization of conflict: talking and not talking. For example, note Carlos' deep felt need to just say, "Mama. Papa. *Háblense*" (talk to each other). It emerges from the folk recognition that the conflict has reached a level where people *no se hablan* (do not directly talk to each other). "Talk" must now travel through a *tercero*, a third person. It is *la plática* once removed. Or it can happen through *indirectas*, a peculiar form of speaking about someone in their presence without addressing them, or without addressing the subject directly.[5] Subtle forms of confrontation take place through inferences, skirting the risk of more volatile direct fighting. They may live in the same house and not talk, as Carlos' family, or they may separate and have no contact: *no se hablan, y no se ven* (don't talk and don't see each other).

Dialogar, another "talk" term, implicitly refers to the movement back

from *no se hablan* to *se hablan*, that is, the movement of conflict from one qualitative level to another. Consider, for example, Roberto's-*consejo* to Carlos: "You are the head now. You have the *confianza* (trust) of your father, but not your mother. You have to *dialogar* with your father, and then later your mother." Or, as Máximo told him, "You have to carry them *(llevarlos)* to dialogue." *Dialogar*, by implicitly recognizing separation and distance in the relationship, is conceived as a bridge for reconnecting. It carries with it a sense of connecting, an entrance into a space in which it is possible to exchange, a contact that permits restoration of a broken or entangled whole.
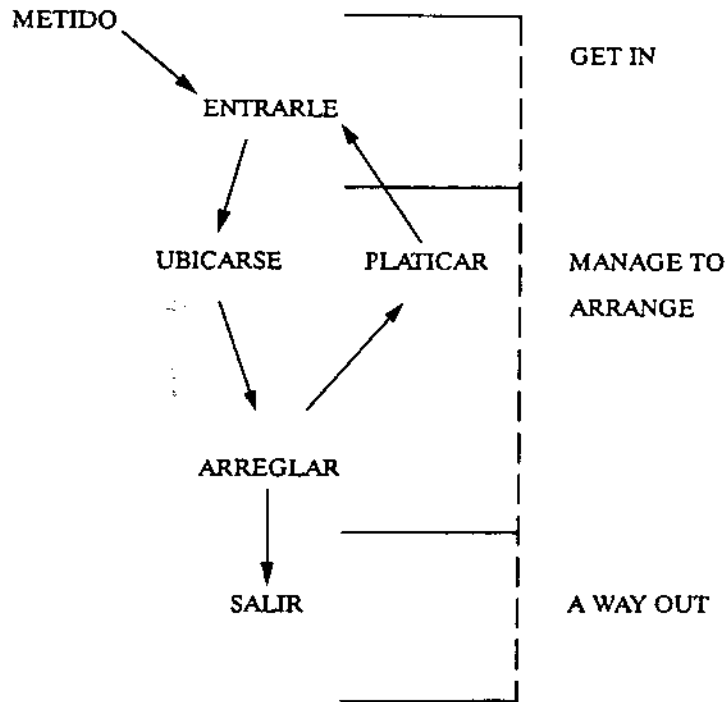
One common way that conflicts are resolved is through *un arreglo*. This is a multifaceted concept. Consider, for example, different contexts in which forms of the term are used. *"Arreglo de llantas"* handpainted on a sign hanging on a garage denotes a common form of self-employment: fixing flat tires. Florist shops make flower "arrangements" *(arreglos)*; children are *arreglados* for school; accounts are "settled" *(arregladas)*. To the question of surprise, "How did you pull that off?" a common response may be "I've got my ways" *(yo me las arreglo)*. Or looking more directly at a particular arena of conflict, in Costa Rica negotiated settlements arranged directly between workers and management as a way to avoid strikes and that do not use arbitration, court, or government intervention are called *arreglos directos*, a direct agreement.

In folk usage as it refers to conflict, *arreglo* seems to combine three primary meanings. The first we see in Carlos' statement that nobody in his family gives "even a grain of sand to *arreglar* this situation." Here, the conceptualization is that of repair. Viewing his explanation in its broader context, Carlos understands an *arreglo* for his family as a way of fixing, of putting back together that which is broken and separated. We see an underlying and implicit recognition that the network is not as it should be and must be restored. Notice also that this way of thinking evolves through holistic problem conception.

The second and third meanings we see in Doña Fidelia's comment, "If there is no love, there is no *arreglo*." That is, without the basis of mutual caring, there is no possibility of creating an "arrangement" that permits restoration. In other statements she added that the family has to be more *sinceros*, in the sense of being more open, and have to know how to "understand" and "carry each other" *(hay que saberlo comprender y saberlo llevar)*. "Arrangements" seem to be based on permitting mutual entry into the world of the other: "We understand each other." From understanding comes the possibility of "carrying each other": we mutually recognize our part in the whole. An *arreglo* is conceived as a combination of "understanding" and "arranging." Through an arrangement and an understanding, we fix the broken and undo the tangled.

In Figure 8.1 we can visualize the folk understanding of the conflict

Figure 8.1
The "Ins and Outs" of Conflict

METIDO

ENTRARLE   GET IN

UBICARSE   PLATICAR   MANAGE TO
                                ARRANGE

ARREGLAR

SALIR   A WAY OUT

process as described through everyday language. It could be summarized in the following phrase: "We get in, so we can manage to arrange a way out." In short, *metido* is a recognition that we are caught. *Entrarle* is a set of social processes for moving fully "into" the problem through the people involved. Once inside, it is necessary to "get located." This evolves through some form of "talk." If it is not directly between those involved it will come through the "third," who, talking with both sides, formulates the "arrangement" and "understanding." An "arrangement" then becomes the *salida,* or the "way out." While a *salida* can often be a form of escape using avoidance tactics, an *arreglo* is a "way out" that restores the relationship through mutual comprehension resulting from dialogue. As such, *arreglar,* based on *"ubicarse"* and *"la plática,"* is a folk term for "conflict management," but not in the sense of explicit strategies for controlling the expression of conflict, but rather in the implicit, taken-for-granted sense of "managing to work it out." There is, throughout, the recognition that one is a part of a wider whole, which has to be entered and restored. Further, the visualization helps us perceive the

process as circular rather than linear, as a constant movement back and forth between these taken-for-granted yet crucial aspects of getting in and out of a conflict.

CULTURAL PATHS OF CONFLICT ACTION

The actual, real-life workings of these ethnomethods result in three significant and appropriate paths of cultural conflict-action: *el consejo, la confianza,* and *las patas.* A Western mind would be tempted to call these techniques. It is hard, however, to reduce a way of being and relating to a technique. It is preferable to consider them cultural paths, which essentially are folk categories of appropriate ways to respond to a conflict. These are, therefore, more akin to general strategies than specific tactics.

In exposing his problem to the group Carlos was seeking a *consejo,* a piece of advice. To ask and give *consejos* is the first and most common path of response to conflict. It is the intersection between *ubicarse* and *platicar*: I talk with others to get my bearings in this situation. Or to put it in the words of the pop song, "I get by with a little help from my friends." While this may sound facetious, the underlying phenomenological importance of a *consejo* in the process of conflict should not be lost, that is, "how" and "why" a *consejo* makes its appearance.

We can understand the reasons and process behind a *consejo* by considering another typical folk expression for conflict: *"Qué problema!"* "What a problem!" It is often said with a sigh, or with special emphasis added through the Latin finger slap. The message is understood. Conflicts are experienced as a jolt in the flow of everyday life. The folk vision understands that in conflicts, events and peoples' behavior surrounding those events are literally problematic, that is, the "meaning" is not readily apparent and cannot be taken for granted. In other words, special attention must be paid to these things. Likewise, the appropriate response to those people and events is problematic, and thus poses the need to *ubicarse,* to locate oneself and "things" in a frame that make them and one's action meaningful. A first step involves explaining those "things" and the problem to oneself. To seek a *consejo,* however, is a process that moves the explanation from a subjective and individual to a social and intersubjectively shared level. This process is simultaneously the entry of the "third" and the social construction of meaning. We create and tie ourselves to a reality beyond the personal. This seemingly simple process represents the very basis of constructing social reality, and merits further description from the folk perspective.

Superficially and with a Western individualistic bias, a *consejo* feels like one person is telling the other what to do. For example, take the group's *consejos* given to Carlos. In virtually every instance, people told him, "You have to (*vos tenés que*)." Careful study of the broader context and the

more complete transcript, however, highlights a key observation. A wide variety of *consejos* came out, and in some cases the same person gave different and even somewhat contrary opinions. This seems to back up what I have seen in other settings where *consejos* were being offered. While framed in what appears to be an imperative grammatical structure, the *consejo* is not interpreted as an order but rather an option, a possible way out, a possible view of the situation. From the perspective of all involved, the most important thing is participation; spontaneously give your view, your advice. And virtually everybody has an opinion, something to offer. Rarely, if ever, do you hear, "Boy, I don't know what I'd do." It is a little like giving directions in Central America; even if I do not know where it is, it is improper to not respond with an idea. Nobody will be necessarily tied to this *consejo*, but by giving it, we are part of, we participate, we create better understanding, we find an appropriate frame. We have fulfilled a network task. We participate in creating our shared social reality, in reaffirming and tying ourselves to it. In this example from the Puntarenas group, the *consejo* represented a way of "thinking together," of being with the other, of sharing, of not only situating the problem in the network, but more important, of once again reconstructing our shared sense of the whole, of the reality we create and live in.

At a second level of investigation and considering observations made throughout Central America, when asked about "asking advice" peoples' responses identified several key terms that indicate a variety of purposes and expectations. "Orientation," for example, parallels the idea that a *consejo* helps to get one situated and discover an appropriate frame. On the other hand, people may seek *ayuda* through the *consejo* indicating more involvement: action and intervention on the part of the third party in behalf of the person is expected. Further, *ayuda* is often specifically related to financial problems. *Apoyo* (support) through *consejo* is indicative that a person needs a safe place to share a problem and a friend to listen and talk with. Its purpose may simply be to reaffirm and show "moral support" for the person.

In this latter idea we introduce the second major path: It is not possible to ask a *consejo* of just anybody, only those who "inspire" *confianza*. This complex and profoundly cultural idea cannot be captured in a single English term, although most often it is translated as "trust." To have *confianza* denotes a special quality of relationship, a bond of mutuality and understanding. Within the folk conceptualization there are levels of *confianza*, each with different expectations and requirements.

Confianza is a process, something that is built over time and accumulative. It moves from the level of "knowing someone" (*nos conocemos*) to "friendship" (*nos conocemos bien*, we know each other well), to the ultimate, "a person with whom I can share a personal problem." The three verbs—

to have, to inspire, and to deposit—that most regularly accompany *confianza* illustrate this further. Through contact and time I know if a person "inspires" *confianza* in me, that is, whether I have the sense that I can safely "deposit" my trust with them. As a group of social workers in San Jose decided, "With time we arrive at personal knowledge that permits us to ascertain their sincerity, the base for friendship and *confianza*." It is a process by which I evaluate if and how many of my intimacies I can safely place with the other. Take, for example, the phrase *la confianza que rompió el saco*. This refers to an abuse of trust, that someone has taken advantage of our friendship by asking for too much. Such an abuse "broke the sack"; the accumulated contents spilled out.

We can understand more clearly these levels of *confianza* by looking at it in the context of folk networking. *Confianza* and the network are resources for problem solving. At the first level, "to know someone" makes that person a potential contact, at the periphery of our network but not in it. Here there is not sufficient *confianza* to ask for a *consejo* or *ayuda* in solving a problem. If that person was determined to be in a special position to be helpful, perceived as a *entrada* into our problem, then we would look for a "friend of a friend." In other words, we go to someone in our network, with whom we have more *confianza* and who, simultaneously, has *confianza* with the other targeted person, who will in turn serve as an "entry" into the problem.

This carries us to the second level of *confianza*, friendship. Friendship comes with time and more intimate knowledge. Friends are "in" my network, part of *mi gente*. Here we can expect more and expect to give more. The type of problem solving that emerges at this level can be seen through the type of *consejos* sought and given. They will often be related to what might be called "external matters": how to deal with a financial problem, how to get through bureaucracy, how to handle a community problem.

"Internal problems," *problemas personales*, are saved for the third level, the *entre nos* level. *Entre nos* means "just between you and me." Here we can talk as if we were "family." In some instances it is an opening for sharing a piece of secret gossip. But it always carries with it a sense of intimacy, of openness and trust. This is similar to the *consejo* offered by Henry. "Talk to the oldest brother *tú a tú*, tell him what you need." *Tú a tú* is a folk category for a type of talk. It will be intimate. I will reveal myself, my needs. I will open myself and expect openness from you. What is said will be respected and kept to ourselves.

The *Porteños* have a special word for these type of friends, *huevitos*. The origin of the image, in their explanation, is picturesque if a bit vulgar. In most of Latin America, *huevos*, or eggs, is a slang term for testicles, or "balls" as we might say. In port town talk, *huevitos* are the closest of friends, like "two balls in the sack." Where you find one, you

will find the other. *Huevitos* are not family members, but are friends who know each other "like family." They are *compenetrados*, they know each other from the "inside out." It is with one's *huevito* that one has the surest sense of *confianza*. It is *confianza entre nos*.

Confianza entre nos takes place between only a select few in the network. It is reserved for intimate friends and family. It is distinguished above all by the ability to share and talk about a "personal problem." *Confianza* at this level can be recognized by the fact that two interpersonal relational norms can be broken without consequence. The first involves "talk about the other." *Tú a tú* permits open, frank talk about the other. As one group in Guatemala said, "We can *decirlo todo* (say it all), without that affecting our relationship. We are still friends." In other words, we can confront directly, face-to-face, without paying the "normal" consequences. For example, in many cases, the consequence of direct confrontation is the movement to "not talking." The second norm involves "talk about self." *Confianza entre nos* permits me to *ventilar*, "air out" my personal problem, to reveal my hidden world, to let another into my world.

Confianza entre nos is problem solving based on a mutuality of trust, and rare, intimate self-revelation of problems, hurts, and weaknesses. It is a form of peer therapy, of healing through a trust relationship, of restoration of the network through the healing. It was with considerable insight that when they decided to launch out into the community and offer themselves as "counselors," the group in Puntarenas hung a sign in front of their room that read: *"Centro de Confianza: Orientación y Consejería"* (The Trust Center: Orientation and Counseling).

A third path for problem solving is to have *patas*, or connections.[6] *Patas* literally are feet. Metaphorically it is "networking." It views people in our network as resources who can, because of their position, abilities, or connections, accomplish something that we need to resolve our problem. *Patas* is the conflict-action of knowing people in the right place who can effect the action desired. Close examination of the "talk" that makes use of the "connection" reveals the purpose is not self-revelation but rather getting action from the other on our behalf. It is based on accumulated knowledge about people, their functions, their relationships and connections, and, most important, the inner net-workings. It is knowledge about who to turn to in order to accomplish what kind of task. It is important to describe the relationship and differences between *confianza* and *patas*. This will be best accomplished by describing a specific example.

During about six months I worked off and on with a conflict in a Nicaraguan Mennonite congregation of refugees in Costa Rica. As a backdrop to this description I should clarify that I worked for a North American Mennonite relief agency collaborating with the Costa Rican

Mennonite Convention in a resettlement project for the Nicaraguan congregation, made up of about forty families. The convention leadership was made up of almost entirely Costa Rican Mennonites, although it still received a good portion of its budget from a different Mennonite mission. Although we were organizationally separate and I had nothing to do with the inner workings and decisions of the convention, in the view of the refugees there was little distinction and I was viewed as a missionary, working with the convention.

These refugees had originally come from the same region in Nicaragua, although not all of them had been members of the same congregation there. On the way down others from a variety of denominations joined them, the majority from a pentecostal background. Once in the refugee camp the congregation grew and as the possibility of resettlement became a reality, a conflict emerged that threatened to split the group. It evolved around leadership issues, membership and adherence to "Mennonite" doctrine, and access to resources, primarily who would get to go to the farm. I met with the two major groups and their leaders on numerous occasions. Given the circumstances and events I spent considerable time alone with Javier, a Mennonite pastor who, through the long journey by foot out of Nicaragua, had become intimate with and was the unspoken leader of the non-Mennonite, pentecostal group. We began to develop *confianza*. They eventually created an *arreglo*. Javier decided to stay and give leadership to the congregation that would remain in the camp. The Mennonites, over the course of the year, would move to the farm. Before separating a "reconciliation," as they called it, took place between the two groups, restoring their relationship.

That was not, however, the end of my participation. Over the course of the next five months I got numerous phone calls from and had several meetings with Javier. Shortly after the "reconciliation" I received a call inviting me to come and meet with the pentecostal "brothers," to hear their "expressions." Curious and a bit uncertain about the invitation, I asked if he wanted me to bring along other leaders of the Mennonite Convention, who were responsible for administering funds, directing the refugee project, and providing spiritual leadership to the churches. Javier responded, "No, it is better for you come alone, first." I went and met with Javier and the group of five pentecostal brothers. Over the course of a morning they explained their view. They had two primary concerns: not to be left alone and outside of the convention after the others left for the farm; and whether there was any chance they could eventually get back on the list to go to the farm. They were interested in my *consejo* and in my "helping" them with the convention. I was their "entry" and their *patas*. I promised and did contact the convention leadership, although nothing happened in the next few weeks.

A month later Javier called again. He reiterated their concern about getting *apoyo* from the convention. In my awkward *gringo* style I probed the question of why he did not call and talk to them directly. He responded, clarifying the unspoken knowledge that he assumed we all knew but which I was struggling to make explicit: "No, brother, you are the channel (*canal*) that can help us (*ayudarnos*) with them." I was, I discovered, the ongoing go-between. I again spoke at more length with convention leaders and we agreed to set up a meeting and invite Javier the following week, *si Dios quiere* (God willing). God did not provide that opportunity. Among trips, conferences, and work, the meeting got lost in the shuffle.

Several months later I received a call from Javier. He was in the San Jose area and wanted to know if we could see each other and *platicar*. As I was soon to discover he had made the four-hour bus trip to see me, personally. We did speak and he again underscored their needs, especially as related to *apoyo* from the convention for the congregation in the camp. This time his view and concern became clearer. As he explained the most frustrating aspect: "I do not know how things are set up, who I should talk to when I have a problem." Javier was concerned that his network was falling apart. Now that the Mennonites were going to the farm, his congregation would be left without contacts in the Mennonite world. A Mennonite pastor, leading a congregation of pentecostals, in a refugee camp in a foreign country: They were a people without a net. He was engaged in a mission to put the network together. I was the entry, the first step in getting that accomplished.

What is of particular interest in this example are the steps leading down the path of *patas* as problem solving. First, there is recognition of the problem. In this case: how to get *apoyo*, and assure that we are in the convention network, which will provide us with a variety of resources. Second, there is accumulated and implicit knowledge of the networkings. This necessitates a response to two questions: Deciding who, in the end, can effect the results we desire, and what the best way is to reach that person to assure action. The response to the first was the leadership of the convention; the response to the second involved a search for an entry and an evaluation of contacts and *confianza*.

Javier had numerous options. He knew each of the members on the council, including the president. He had the number of the convention as well as those of several individuals on the council. We even met in front of the convention offices when he came the last time. But he did not call them, he called me. He looked for and decided on the person with whom he had the most *confianza* and who was connected to the people who could effect the desired action. Finally, he chose the most appropriate way of assuring action: personal contact. Get into the problem by getting into the right person. This is not necessarily *confianza*
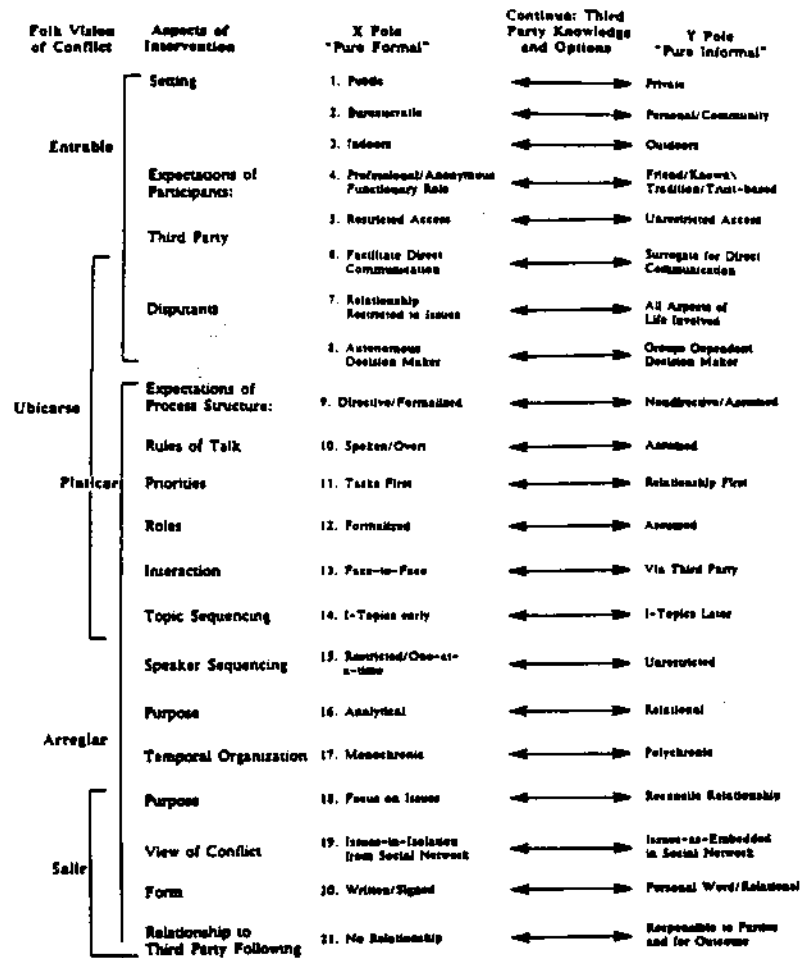
entre nos; it is friendship *confianza*. He was not pursuing this path to work on a personal problem, he pursued it to get action on his behalf as a way to resolve an external problem. His knowledge of us, of conventions, of mission boards and missionaries suggested at least a working, if not intimate relationship between the convention and myself. He had made an evaluation of me and our relationship, as compared to his relationship with others. In his mind, our time alone "inspired" enough *confianza* to make this a reasonable and expected request. He could "deposit" his trust. I was the logical entry. I became the channel. He contacted me to contact them. *Patas* is an appropriate image: you get "feet" to enter in where you do not have access.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION: CROSS-CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our discussion thus far both invites and permits us to consider the implications for intervention within this setting and cross-culturally. As a point of departure let us consider the case with Javier and our discussion of the "ins and outs" in reference with the continua of cultural expectations (Figure 8.2). This classification originally emerged through an earlier study of the assumptions taken for granted in the North American, Anglo, and professional model of mediation (Lederach 1985). It is based on cross-cultural literature and common characteristics identified by social scientists to distinguish "modern" and "traditional" societies. I have adapted it to fit the basic folk language and vision described above. In brief, the continua suggest several basic aspects with important components that must be accomplished as third parties enter a conflict. How these specific components are accomplished varies from one cultural setting to another. This "variance" can be conceived as a continuum between a "pure formal" and "pure informal" model of intervention. The continua suggest that as third parties enter a dispute they must use knowledge about what are appropriate ways of responding to the conflict and the disputants. For example, they must decide what setting or forum is most appropriate for the resolution procedures to follow, they must decide what form of contact and communication should be used, they must determine what kind of outcomes are desired and appropriate, and they must use knowledge about what is expected of them and their relationship to the disputants. For example, in the case of Javier, broadly speaking, the intervention was very informal. My role and the expectations about my role were never formalized, but rather were assumed. It is precisely the assumptions that Javier took for granted but that I did not necessarily share that highlight intercultural differences. Consider these other items the continua contemplate.

First, in essence I was a surrogate for direct communication between

Figure 8.2
Continua of Assumptions Affecting Conflict Process and Intervention

Folk Vision of Conflict	Aspects of Intervention	X Pole "Pure Formal"	Continua: Third Party Knowledge and Options	Y Pole "Pure Informal"
Entrable	Setting	1. Puede	←——→	Private
		2. Bureaucratic	←——→	Personal/Community
		3. Indoor	←——→	Outdoor
	Expectations of Participants:	4. Professional/Anonymous Functionary Role	←——→	Friend/Known Tradition/Trust-based
		5. Restricted Access	←——→	Unrestricted Access
	Third Party	6. Facilitate Direct Communication	←——→	Surrogate for Direct Communication
Ubicarse	Disputants	7. Relationship Restricted to Issues	←——→	All Aspects of Life Involved
		8. Autonomous Decision Maker	←——→	Ortega Onpendent Decision Maker
	Expectations of Process Structure:	9. Directive/Formalized	←——→	Nondirective/Assumed
Platicar	Rules of Talk	10. Spoken/Overt	←——→	Assumed
	Priorities	11. Tasks First	←——→	Relationship First
	Roles	12. Formalized	←——→	Assumed
	Interaction	13. Face-to-Face	←——→	Via Third Party
	Topic Sequencing	14. I-Topics early	←——→	I-Topics Later
	Speaker Sequencing	15. Restricted/One-at-a-time	←——→	Unrestricted
	Purpose	16. Analytical	←——→	Relational
Arreglar	Temporal Organization	17. Monochronic	←——→	Polychronic
	Purpose	18. Focus on Issues	←——→	Reasonable Relationship
Salir	View of Conflict	19. Issues-in-Isolation from Social Network	←——→	Issues-as-Embedded in Social Network
	Form	20. Written/Signed	←——→	Personal Word/Relational
	Relationship to Third Party Following	21. No Relationship	←——→	Responsible to Parties and for Outcomes

the convention and Javier, a broker of sorts, but not a decision maker. This was based on an evaluation of *confianza* and "connections." From the beginning until this writing we progressively reached higher levels of *confianza*, which meant I was increasingly a part of his network. I was viewed as a friend within, not a professional outside of the network. Correspondingly, I became a more effective go-between, but one who was in the flow of their expectations.

Second, given this basis there were fewer limits on access to me as a resource. As a *gringo*, at times I felt like it encroached on my "private space." This, of course, never even crossed their minds. Increasingly, the broader aspects of their lives were a part of our discussions. I was not expected to merely concentrate on "mediating" the congregational split: I was pulled in on personal problems, on what to do with the youth, about connections to the convention, about communications back to Nicaragua. There was no simple "in and out" of their lives; the connection was translated into an ongoing relationship. I was, in their taken-for-granted view, responsible to them and for the arrangements reached, not simply negotiating a settlement on isolated issues.

Third, problems are conceived in the context of the network. Even when they seemingly fell outside, it became necessary to expand the network, to locate the connections that permitted Javier to get "in" and "out." Correspondingly, as a third party I was sought out because I was connected. Legitimacy of the go-between was established not through distance and neutrality, but rather through knowledge and trust. As such, there was no "dropping-in" to resolve the problem and then "getting out." At the folk level, "once in, always in": I was, after all, increasingly a part of his network, more like a godparent than a professional mediator. The "third" becomes the hand that knots and sews the net together. Their connection is based on personal relationship, not professional function or written contract.

It is perhaps appropriate at this point to mention briefly what it feels like to mediate and serve as a go-between in another culture. The few accounts I have read of international and intercultural mediations have tended to present their interventions as the work of competent "anthropologist-politicians" who deftly make their way through the cultural meanings and mazes, understand what is going on, and press forth to reach agreement. Quite frankly, I felt more like a bull in a china shop. A sensitive bull perhaps, but nonetheless a bull who with each step ran the risk of crashing through a delicately arranged social structure. The reason, I think, is clear. The understandings, the process, and the expectations for dealing with conflicts were based on the people's implicit knowledge that they assumed operative but which I had not fully accumulated. It is a little like trying to make your way through the china shop without knowing where the aisles are located. I, too, was in a constant process of trying to *ubicarme*.

In many instances, while I had a good command of the language and I understood all the words I struggled to capture the meaning. With Javier I repeatedly found myself trying to break things down, specify what exactly the concerns were, and make a list. Often he would give me a smile, a look of puzzlement, and then tell yet another story explaining what he meant. I would ask things that were obvious to him,

like "What do you expect from me?" To which he would respond: "Be the channel, talk to them, arrange it with them." *Connect, talk*, and *arrange*—the words are loaded with years of accumulated meaning.

My work was not based on a sense of professional intervention but rather a slow process of discovering meaning, expectations, and hopes as a basis for knowing what action on my part would be appropriate and useful, and how, exactly it should be accomplished. Time and again, it was not a set of techniques but rather the simple effort to be with Javier in person that seemed to produce results in this setting. I have found this to be true in the majority of the many disputes I have mediated in Central American settings.

This discussion based around the continua suggests that accomplishing the basic aspects of intervention in a conflict can vary broadly in different settings. It highlights the need on the part of intervenors who are not from the setting to be both sensitive and flexible. Personal experience suggests we should recognize that our premises and assumptions about the conflict process are not necessarily shared by those who we are attempting to help, and that we may, inadvertently, break a lot of china in our attempts to find the aisles.

I have outlined the folk understanding of the conflict process as described through everyday language in several Central American settings, particularly that of Puntarenas. As a conclusion we can identify several important characteristics that affect the understanding and resolution of conflict.

First, conflict is viewed and understood as evolving in an ever-present social network. Within the broader network, the most important connections will be those of the extended family. Untangling and putting the network back together is perhaps the single most pursued purpose of conflict management activity. Likewise, the network itself is the most used resource for resolving problems.

Second, conflict is viewed holistically, not analytically. That is, understanding takes place, not by breaking down the problem into parts, but rather by viewing it as embedded in the "net-workings." Understanding the conflict is a process of "getting inside it" through entry into the others' world and through the right connections. Successfully accomplished it reaffirms that we are part of a larger whole.

Third, the process of getting "in and out" of conflict is circular rather than phasic in its inner workings. It is not, therefore, linear or "rational" in nature. In other words, it is not based on an evaluation of what is the most direct, time-efficient, or effective manner of resolving this problem. It is based on what is proper and traditional, on evaluating the subtleties of trust and the intricacies of relations and connections. It is a process of "locating" and "relocating" oneself, involving taken-for-granted

knowledge about who to turn to, when, and for what reason. Often that will involve an intricate decision about how to go through the branches to get to the trunk.

Finally, the entrance of the "third" is both natural and constant: through this person people are reconnected, the net kept integral. The third party is regularly someone from within, not outside the network. Persons who are too far removed are viewed with reservations, because of the lack of *confianza*. Often they will be the bridge, the channel through which messages and negotiation flow. The expected purpose will be to reconcile the relationship, create an arrangement, not necessarily to isolate and resolve issues. As will the people involved, the "third" will tend to focus on the problem holistically, as embedded in the social network. In the end they are a part of the network, and thus are responsible to the parties for what happens and for the quality of the arrangement made, both based on the ebb and flow of relationships, not written contract.

NOTES

1. There are always certain tradeoffs when one writes in one language about another language and ways of talking. I have opted in this chapter to include the original Spanish for the most important phrases and words. To the uninitiated in Spanish this may appear cumbersome. For the students and native speakers of the language it provides at least a minimal view of the exact language-use-in-context.

2. Central America is made up of many varying cultural settings. There is tremendous variety between the more isolated areas of the *campo* and the city; between Ladinos and Indians; between the slums and squatter villages and the more established *barrios*. Personally, I have worked with numerous indigenous groups, refugees, and a variety of religious groups. It is, of course, difficult if not erroneous to generalize across such broad populations. To avoid this trap, I will identify as clearly as possible the specific group I am referring to as I make my points.

3. Curious about this I designed a simple exercise in my workshops on conflict management in which people were asked to list all the synonyms for conflict they could identify. I have carried out this exercise over a dozen times in seven countries in this region and to date nearly two hundred words and phrases have collectively been identified. They indicate a wealth of accumulated folk knowledge about levels and types of disputes, as well as providing metaphoric insight into folk conceptualization.

4. It should not be lost that this folk vision closely parallels and lends support to the work of Georg Simmel (1955), who consistently viewed conflict, as one of his titles suggests, as the "web" of group affiliation. Lewis Coser (1956) would later discuss this as a function, the "cross-stitching" or "binding" effect of conflict.

5. This folk tactic seems prevalent throughout Latin America. In Brazil, for example, they call it *intriga*. When I am *intrigado* with a person I do not talk, or

address that person directly, nor does that person talk with me. While leading
a seminar in Recife, a North American friend described to me the case of his
two employees who became *intrigado*. One morning they had a number of errands
to complete but the car was broken. The three of them were together in the
room as they discussed what to do. Employee 1 had certain tasks that morning
and did not need a vehicle. My friend then suggested that employee 2 take the
bike that belonged to employee 1 to complete his errands. He said he could not
do that. When asked why he responded, "We are *intrigado* and I cannot ask him
to use the bike." They could not directly address "the word," that is, could not
talk to each other, much less make requests. It could only be accomplished
through my friend, even though all were in the room together and engaged in
the discussion.

6. *Patas* is a word that seems specific to a Costa Rican setting. *Cuello* is perhaps
more broadly understood in most of Central America although it is Honduran
in origin. In Spain they would say *enchufe* (plug-in); in Mexico it is *palanca*
(leverage).

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