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Turning Point Research: Advancing Process Analysis in Negotiation

Linda L. Putnam

As a scholar with a special interest in communication, I have always been captivated by process, specifically, how a negotiation evolves over time. My research began in the laboratory setting in which I noticed how bargainers who had the same negotiation exercise and directions developed radically different processes—some that escalated into impasse through matching contentious tactics while others that reached agreements through buffering mismatched strategies (Putnam and Jones, 1982). This work evolved into a research program that focused on understanding negotiation processes; namely, the study of communication strategies and sequences (Adair and Loewenstein, 2013). Later in my career I focused on teacher-administrator negotiations, particularly on the development of policy arguments over time and shifts in language patterns that helped teams reach settlements—often through experiencing a crisis, discovering new insights, reframing issues, and transforming the negotiation itself (Putnam, 2010; Putnam, Wilson and Turner, 1990). I also learned that these shifts in negotiation development paralleled the work on turning points in international negotiations (Druckman, 1986).

Turning points are critical moments that occur during a negotiation interaction or development process (Druckman and Olekalns, 2013b). This essay compares two bodies of research, communication strategies and sequences and turning point studies, to decipher the contributions of turning point research to negotiation scholarship. It begins with a brief overview of the work on communication strategies and sequences and then examines the contributions of turning point studies to unearthing the complexities of negotiation process. It concludes with suggestions for advancing the study of turning points and negotiation process. In doing so, this essay pays tribute to Dan Druckman’s 1986 article and his thirty years of conducting important scholarship on turning points in international negotiations.

RESEARCH ON COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND SEQUENCES

Similar to Druckman’s 1986 article, communication scholars have coded negotiation talk through adapting the category system “Bargaining Process Analysis” (Walcott, Hopmann, and King, 1977), tracking sequences of moves and countermoves (Putnam and Jones, 1982), and coding cue-response pairs of bargainers’

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actions and reactions (Donohue, Diez, and Hamilton, 1984). These studies often employ lag sequential or log linear analyses of interaction structures (Olekalns and Smith, 2000; Putnam and Jones, 1982; Putnam et al., 1990) or use Markov chain methods to track interaction patterns (Donohue, et al., 1984; Smith, Olekalns, and Weingart, 2005). As a form of process analysis, this research has uncovered patterns linked to bargaining outcomes (impasse versus settlements), moderators that influence tactic use (e.g., social value orientation, national culture, etc.), and sequences that produce different types of structured interactions (see, Adair and Loewenstein, 2013; Olekalns, Putnam, Weingart, and Metcalf, 2008, for a synthesis of this research).

Clearly, the research on communication sequences parallels studies of turning points since both approaches focus on the bargaining process. Both lines of work have discovered that negotiators who diverge in strategy use are no longer in sync. In studies on communication sequences, when negotiators diverge or use opposite sequences of strategies (i.e., asynchronous mismatching in turning points), a “transformation” occurs and marks a shift between cooperative and competitive phases of negotiation (Adair and Loewenstein, 2013; Brett, Shapiro, and Lytle, 1998). Similar to work on turning points, these transformational sequences signal a crisis or departure that threatens the negotiation process. Negotiators respond through using buffering approaches (Putnam and Jones, 1982), employing systematic questions (i.e., ones that probe the larger context of the conflict), and shifting the talk to different levels (e.g., moving from negotiator level to the organizational system level) that alters the course of conflict (Putnam, 2010). In effect, research on the types and sequences of negotiation strategies has made important contributions to tracking the synchronization of moves, relative frequencies of strategies, and the development of bargaining phases and stages. However, this work falls short in identifying the events that contribute to crisis moments in negotiation and exploring the levels of analysis that combine negotiation talk with actual decisions.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF RESEARCH ON TURNING POINTS

Turning point research parallels studies of communication stages and sequences in tracing interaction structures, situating departures as transitions in negotiation movement, and aligning these moves with escalating or de-escalating the process (consequences). In both lines of work, impasse and crisis often precipitate departures and signal threats to the negotiation. Research on turning points, however, makes three additional contributions to understanding this complex process.

First, it moves beyond content, internal patterns, and substantive precipitants (i.e., the main source of departures in communication studies) to examine the role of external events, such as governmental interventions or political occurrences, that are outside of a negotiator’s control (Druckman, 2004). Specifically, comparisons of turning points among types of negotiation (e.g., trade, security,
multinational, intellectual property, and labor) reveal important findings about de-escalation (Crump and Druckman, 2012, 2016; Druckman, 2001; Llorente, Luchi, and Sioli, 2013; Putnam and Fuller, 2014), with security and intellectual property negotiations dependent on external precipitants, trade and political on substantive ones, and labor negotiations on procedural precipitants. Tying these types of negotiations to sources of conflict shows that turning point sequences differ for conflicts of interest (i.e., matters of control and disarmament), cognitive conflicts (i.e., issues of understanding such as international trade), and value-based conflicts (i.e., political and environmental issues). Namely, departures that occur in conflicts of interest and cognitive conflicts de-escalate negotiation and foster agreements whereas the same pattern in value conflicts escalates interactions and turns bargainers away from agreement. In effect, context matters in tracking negotiation processes, particularly its role in linking turning points, types of negotiation, and sources of the conflict (Druckman, 2005; Druckman and Olekalns, 2013b).

Secondly, turning point studies incorporate choices, decisions, and re-framing into transitions and future interactions (Druckman and Olekalns, 2013a). Decisions serve as interpretive filters that allow negotiators to re-frame issues and alter the direction of the process (Druckman, Olekalns, and Smith, 2009). Re-framing focuses on how negotiators see events as an opportunity or a desperation action (Druckman and Olekalns, 2013a), label or rename issues, re-align agenda items, or package issues differently (Druckman, Husbands, and Johnston, 1991; Putnam and Shoemaker, 2007). Thus, it draws on contextual features linked to making sense of the negotiation itself.

A related and third contribution of turning point research is incorporating multiple levels of analysis (Druckman, 2004), particularly the collective or institutional level. Research on communicative strategies and sequences focuses on the interactive and individual levels (Adair and Loewenstein, 2013), but has largely ignored the collective level of events and institutional processes. In contrast, turning points analysis aims to incorporate all three levels (i.e., individual, interactional, and collective), especially as they influence changes in relationships among parties and the negotiation process itself (Crump and Druckman, 2012). At the collective level, turning point analysis is particularly conducive to examining the effects of macro-level events on negotiation development, but as Druckman (this issue) notes, these external precipitants surface as discrete events bound by the negotiation itself rather than as rules and norms guided by institutional structures. In summary, turning point research has made three key contributions to understanding negotiation processes, namely, incorporating context features into transitions, investigating decisions as choices in re-framing the negotiation, and examining micro and macro levels of analysis. The work has developed methodologies for conducting both prospective and retrospective analyses, and thus addresses the criticism that departures are only evident retrospectively in relation to their consequences (Donohue, 2004). In general, studies of turning points in negotiation, starting with Druckman’s 1986 article, are critical to the work on negotiation process.
ADVANCING RESEARCH ON NEGOTIATION PROCESS AND TURNING POINTS

Studies of negotiation development and turning point research, in particular, could benefit from sharpening conceptual distinctions, clarifying underlying logics, and exploring additional types of precipitants. In particular, the literature on turning points often exhibits a maze of closely-related concepts, including transitions (Druckman and Olekalns, 2013b; McGinn, Lingo, and Ciano, 2004; Olekalns et al., 2008), transformations (Brett et al., 1998; Putnam, 2004); interruptions (Druckman and Olekalns; 2013b; Kolb, 2004; Stuart, 2004), and critical moments (Leary, 2004). Despite decades of work in the area, the terminology remains confusing and different definitions often surface for the same term. For example, scholars define the concept of turning points as changes that punctuate the negotiation process or “critical moments that occur during an interaction or development process” (Druckman and Olekalns, 2013b: 332), significant changes that move the process toward or away from a settlement (Olekalns et al., 2008: 97), “events or processes that mark passage of a negotiation from one stage to the next, signaling progress from earlier to later phases” (Druckman et al., 1991: 56, also Druckman, 2001), and “dramatic moments in which the conflict shifts direction” (Putnam and Shoemaker, 2007).

Although scholars typically concur that the framework includes precipitants, departures, and consequences, they often differ as to whether a departure needs to be significant or consequential to the process. Does it need to mark or punctuate process development? Does it need to consider the overall outcome of a negotiation, not just escalation or de-escalation of the process? Responding to these questions entails teasing out the relationships among turning points, transitions, interruptions, and transformations. In synthesis work, the turning point framework appears to encompass all three (see Druckman and Olekalns, 2013b). That is, it incorporates transitions (e.g., passage from one stage to the next; synchronization, process tracing, event changes); interruptions (e.g. unexpected events that challenge the dominant dynamic, procedures that redirect the negotiation, temporal breaks, external disruptions); and transformations (e.g., moments when parties reach new understandings of the negotiation itself, re-frame choices, and change “the nature of the game,” Putnam, 2004, 2010). Embracing these three activities within the turning point framework leads to conceptual slippage and makes it difficult to apply the model.

One way to tease out these relationships is to expand theoretical explanations related to these concepts. These developments might explore what types of departures and precipitants produce transformations as opposed to transitions? How much change from an earlier event or pattern results in a transformation as opposed to a transition? Which patterns lead to interruptions and how do interruptions function in changing the relationships between parties? This theorizing might be based on the goals for studying turning points, for example, differentiating agreement from disagreement or uncovering the patterns that make a fundamental or dramatic shift in a negotiation?
In this theorizing, scholars might incorporate the work on types of interaction goals (Wilson and Putnam, 1990). Interaction goals refer to the dynamic and continually adjusted objectives or preference sets that emerge within the negotiation process as bargainers influence each other’s positions and reshape issues and relationships. Specifically, Wilson and Putnam note that three types of interactional goals characterize negotiation: instrumental, relational, and identity. Instrumental refers to substantive or task related aims while relational deals with issues of trust, power, and openness. Identity goals center on projecting a desired self-image or saving face. These three types of goals arise from different levels of interaction and may underscore departures and turning points in the logic of negotiation talk. For example, negotiation talk might focus on the instrumental enactment of offers and concessions but a departure occurs when the interaction shifts to relational issues, particularly which side has conceded the most. Shifts to identity talk might occur as interruptions when bargainers receive negative feedback from constituents and focus on protecting their face. Types of interaction goals and levels of abstraction in which they become salient exemplify an underlying logic. The logic, in this case, is the ongoing sequence of an interaction goal that forms a coherent pattern in the negotiation process. A break in this coherency may aid in distinguishing among transitions, interruptions, and transformations in theorizing about turning points.

In addition, theoretical explanations need to incorporate findings related to different negotiation contexts, for example, security, environmental, intellectual property, and labor disputes. New types of precipitants or consequences might surface in these explanations. Specifically, in their study of a labor strike, Putnam and Fuller (2014) identified a new category, strategic precipitant which referred to actions or events orchestrated by bargainers external to the negotiation interaction but aimed at exerting pressure on the other party. Strategic precipitants combined internal and external events as union negotiators (and eventually management teams) orchestrated campaigns, rallies, and political demonstrations concomitant with ongoing negotiations (i.e., negotiation sessions continued despite the presence of a strike).

Since the parties orchestrated and controlled these events, they were not strictly external activities, even though they occurred away from the negotiation table. They represented a combination of external (e.g. staging a corporate campaign) with procedural precipitants (e.g., walking out, filing an unfair labor grievance, taking a strike vote) to shape departures that escalated the conflict. Employing alternative procedural precipitants (e.g., informal talks, side-deals with independent companies, and new negotiators) and discontinuing the use of strategic ones de-escalated the dispute and pressured both parties to move toward agreement. Thus, comparing turning points in radically different types of conflicts holds promise for expanding the turning point framework and developing theoretical explanations.
CONCLUSION

Looking back, turning point research has made a number of key contributions to process work, namely, incorporating contextual features into negotiation development. Specifically, turning point analyses examine how events facilitate shifts in negotiation interaction patterns. In addition, turning point studies have become both retrospective and prospective, track the reframing of issues, and examine departures and precipitants at both micro and macro levels of analysis. The work has expanded beyond international negotiations to examine environmental, intellectual property, and labor disputes.

Looking forward, scholars involved in turning point research need to sharpen distinctions among interrelated terms, such as transitions, interruptions, and transformations. This sharpening might occur in theory development through exploring how these three interrelated processes are tied to different negotiation outcomes, for example, agreement versus no agreement, altering the nature of the dispute itself, or changing the relationships between the parties. Teasing these processes out rather than grouping them under one umbrella might be a way to expand theoretical explanations.

A second avenue might be to trace shifts in the interaction goals of negotiators as they move across instrumental, relational, and identity concerns in interactions. Departures from coherent patterns in interaction goals may also be tied to differences among transitions, interruptions, and transformations. Another option for expanding theorizing is to draw on findings that show how turning points differ across negotiation contexts. In general, research on turning points in negotiation has gained considerable appeal in the last several decades. Because of the rich and vital insights it brings to this scholarship, the future of this line of work and process studies of negotiation is very promising.

REFERENCES


