Relation in Action:
The Self and the Other

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Usually smooth and continuous, the process of human sign-based meaning-making is occasionally obstructed by the emergence of one (or more) counter-suggestive signs. The capacity for continuing meaning creation from sign [A] that usually could enable a meaningful action X is halted by the emergence of sign [B] that emerges simultaneously and with a contradictory meaning to sign [A]. Such a contradiction illuminates a fault-line in the existential framework from which the person derives meaningful action. The contradictory meaning is here referred to as a *semiotic block*. One way to proceed with continuous, consistent and coherent meaning construction, in lieu of abandoning or ignoring either of the emergent meanings, is to navigate around the semiotic block. This can be achieved through the use of semiotic actions called *circumvention strategies*. What I am exploring in this paper are the components of a person's situational relatedness (how the person relates to the situation) that facilitate the person's choice of one particular circumvention strategy over another. I will investigate the dynamic between the external elements and internal psychological components of an "awkward" situation—in relation to how the participants (n=2) outwardly reacted to that situation. To explain this dynamic, I have constructed a model of situational relatedness that results in the choice of circumvention strategy—the *Semiotic Switch*. It is by throwing this switch that one decides how the meaning block can be circumvented, and the process of making meaning can continue as before.

Keywords: semiotic block, circumvention strategy, situational relatedness, Semiotic Switch

INTRODUCTION

I had been dabbling in the martial arts for most of my life when I first began training in Muay Thai, the ancient Thai art of kickboxing, at seventeen. Unlike in my past ventures into the martial arts, I studied Muay Thai with great diligence. I improved quickly and was quite confident that my good form would serve me well in sparring,[1] believing myself to be a "fighter". As it turned out, once I was promoted into the sparring class, my complete lack of fighting experience and generally non-aggressive nature led to an irrepressible instinct to flinch as soon as my opponents' punches started to fly. It was difficult for me to reconcile my supposed skill with my inability to spar well, and I began to think myself a coward.

This setback did not, however, stop me from training. I continued to hone my form, and as my skill continued to improve, I began to take an interest in Chinese martial arts, universally much more artistic than kickboxing styles like Muay Thai. As I studied these more artistic-minded styles, focusing more on tranquility and self-expression, I came to

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[1] Practice fighting

realize that I didn't need to be the strongest or the aggressive; I just needed to know that all my training hadn't been in vain. I gradually abandoned my conception of myself as a "fighter," and replaced it with a new identity: that of a martial *artist*. No longer did I feel like a coward; I accepted my non-aggressiveness as an intrinsic aspect of my personality.

The feeling of cowardice that my repeated defeats in sparring brought me was the emotional result of a *semiotic block*—an interruption in the meaning-making process caused by a clash of two contradictory meanings (Valsiner, 2007). The meaning I had developed through my Muay Thai training was the meaning [self as fighter]. The meaning that emerged to contradict it was [knowledge that I am not good at sparring], derived from the undeniable fact of my defeats. One cannot be a fighter and not be good at fighting—this inconsistency was the clash of meaning (the semiotic block) that I experienced. The shame and disillusion that my defeats brought me created for me a new meaning [self as coward].

The emotional discomfort of holding such a meaning was great. In order to lessen the emotional discomfort of feeling cowardly and to continue to train in martial arts without feeling like I was wasting my time, I needed to construct a new meaning for my training—I needed my training to mean something positive to me. Creating the meaning [self as artist] served this need: instead of a *fighter*, I could be more interested in the artistic aspects than in the combative aspects of martial arts. In turning my perspective on my martial arts training to an artistic pursuit, I was able to psychologically navigate around the clash in meaning and eliminate the uncomfortable feeling of cowardice. This psychological navigation constitutes what is called a *circumvention strategy* (Valsiner & Josephs, 1998).

What this paper investigates is the process by which a person determines which circumvention strategy s/he will use to overcome a semiotic block. By relating to the situation, an individual experiencing a semiotic block feels out what new meaning would be sufficient to circumvent the block. A theoretical model called the *Semiotic Switch* is proposed to help illustrate a person's process of determining what strategy they will use to circumvent a semiotic block based on their situational relatedness. The Switch is founded on the concept that only by determining how one relates one's internal life-world to the external information of the situation does one decide how to deal with that situation—how one will "throw" the Semiotic Switch. The results of a dual condition experimental situation are presented as empirical examples of the Semiotic Switch in action, along with ideas for further expansion.

Clashes of Meaning
Humans are imperfect creatures. We make choices that are not necessarily healthy, try to put unrealistic ideas to practical use, and constantly engage in futile attempts to make sense of the senseless. We often find ourselves conflicted, torn between what is and what we think should be. Our everyday lives are riddled with misconceptions and inconsistencies (some great and many small) that must be overcome in order for us to

continue to act with a sense of purpose. Many of these inconsistencies arise as we attempt to lend some significance to our actions. Making meanings for our actions through the use of signs is the only way we humans have of stabilizing the otherwise incomprehensible sequence of information that is our affective experience (Valsiner, 2007). Many of these signs are discarded before use; others we use temporarily in the situations in which they arise and then discard them; some we retain throughout our lives. Occasionally, however, a sign emerges with a meaning that conflicts with the meaning of another at the same time, or when the meaning derived from an emergent sign contradicts a meaning already in place. Such a clash of meanings is referred to as a semiotic block.

Most semiotic blocks are very minor obstructions in daily activity with little or no emotional investment. In such minor cases one sign can be retained and the other simply forgotten. In a case in which a sign emerges to contradict a meaning already in place, there are two basic options: (1) the previously accepted meaning is retained, and the other emergent sign is forgotten, or (2) the previously accepted meaning is cast aside and replaced by the other meaning by virtue of either its convincing nature or a decrease in the strength of the previously accepted meaning. Examples of these kinds of low-risk (in terms of emotional investment) conflicts of meaning are numerous. For instance, a scandal involving a highly regarded public figure emerges. That public figure's meaning in your mind [decent and respectable person (sign A)] has now been challenged by a new meaning for that person [scandalous individual (sign B)]. You may have little emotional investment in the matter, so whether the new meaning supersedes the one you had already in place is of little consequence to you. Either you will decide that the rumors are just rumors, and that this person is as decent as you always thought him/her to be (retain sign A, discard sign B), or you accept the scandal as true and your opinion of that particular public figure decreases (accept sign B, abandon and discard sign A). Regardless, you will move on with your life.

However, given the vast emotional capacity that humans have, every person will inevitably encounter a sign whose meaning challenges a meaning we have some emotional investment in. After discovering my inability to spar at a competitive level (sign B), I was forced to reassess the significance of my martial arts training, and especially the perception of myself I had retained up to that point [fighter (sign A)]. What separates the example of my martial arts career from the hypothetical example of the scandal was the potential for severe *cognitive dissonance*, a concept mapped out by Festinger et al. (1956).

In the case of my martial arts career, the level of dissonance from the clash between my previously held conception of myself [fighter (sign A)] and my newfound meaning [inability to fight (sign B)] was very high, and the psychological discomfort was severe. I could not, as in the scandal example, simply forget the implications of sign B and retain sign A, as the evidence of my inability to fight competitively was indisputable. I could not help but create the meaning [self as coward] because at the time I had no alternative meaning to fall back

on after realizing my mediocre fighting abilities. Neither could I casually abandon sign A and accept sign B, establishing a new identity as a non-fighter. My emotional, financial, and temporal investment in my martial arts training was too high. I needed a way out, some new meaning that could reconcile my inability to be a competitive-level fighter with my desire to train as one. In order to create this new meaning [self as artist], I had to relate my love of martial arts with my mediocre sparring abilities—to relate my internal psychological components with the components of the external situation. The model I have constructed for this process of relation, resulting in the choice of a circumvention strategy once the ultimate state of situational relatedness has been reached, is called the Semiotic Switch.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
The Semiotic Switch cannot be adequately explained without discussing the theories on which it is based. The following theoretical contributions are used to support its conceptual validity, which will be empirically tested in the next section.

Meaning Making and Meaning Blocking
Any everyday inconsistency that requires us to reconfigure our perception of the situation is a semiotic block. A simple and versatile example of a semiotic block can be seen as follows:

> "Imagine a mother watching her child eat a piece of something, labeled for the child as "bread," which suddenly falls on the floor of a restaurant. Before the child can retrieve it, the mother picks it up and quickly throws it away while telling the child that "this" is now *dirt*. The thing known as bread has *invisibly* changed its identity…if he or she continues to focus on the visually given structure of the bread: The bread was introduced as bread and remains bread. Thus the child may experience a rivalry of meaning. (Valsiner & Josephs, 1998, p. 72)

This "rivalry of meaning" has thrown into doubt the child's previous conception of the bread. Now, realistically, a young child would care little for what the bread means, whether it means dirty or not-dirty, and given the chance s/he would most likely retrieve the bread and eat it, an act which is meaningful in itself (Valsiner & Josephs, 1998). Valsiner and Josephs acknowledge this, so in order to fully explain the semiotic block, and provide a context for their explanation of circumvention strategies that follows, the thought process of the mother (who labeled the bread as dirty) in considering eating the bread herself is described as the first phase of a two-part inner dialogue.

Phase 1:
    1) The bread is on the floor.
    2) The floor is *dirty*.
    3) Therefore *the bread is dirty*.

4) I *should not eat anything dirty.*
5) Therefore I *should not eat this bread.*

"The parts emphasized in this internal dialogue represent the evoked meanings that enter into relations with one another" (p. 72). The mother's rationale for not eating the bread is clear and logical. If then the mother decides *to* eat the bread, her meaning for the bread as dirty will inhibit that decision. In order to eat the bread without some uncertainty as to whether or not she should, she must construct a new meaning for the situation, or the bread itself, in order to circumvent the clash of meaning [want to eat bread] with meaning [inedible because dirty] that the bread has acquired upon falling on the floor.

Circumvention Strategies
In order to achieve her new goal of eating the bread, she must construct a new meaning for her desire to eat the bread—that new meaning will be a circumvention strategy. Figure 1 is the model of negotiations with a semiotic block (Valsiner, 2007) explaining the mother's negotiation with bread/dirt. It delineates the possible outcomes of dealing with a block in meaning that emerges as the meaning-maker starting in situation (A) is attempting to reach a goal (B) through meaningful action. The person's desire to reach the goal (Goal Orientation S) will be achieved by creating a new meaning for the situation, but the semiotic block (the bread is dirty) prevents the goal from being reached under the conditions of that particular meaning. In order to reach the eventual goal, a new meaning must be constructed (C) that will allow the meaning-maker to circumvent the meaning block.
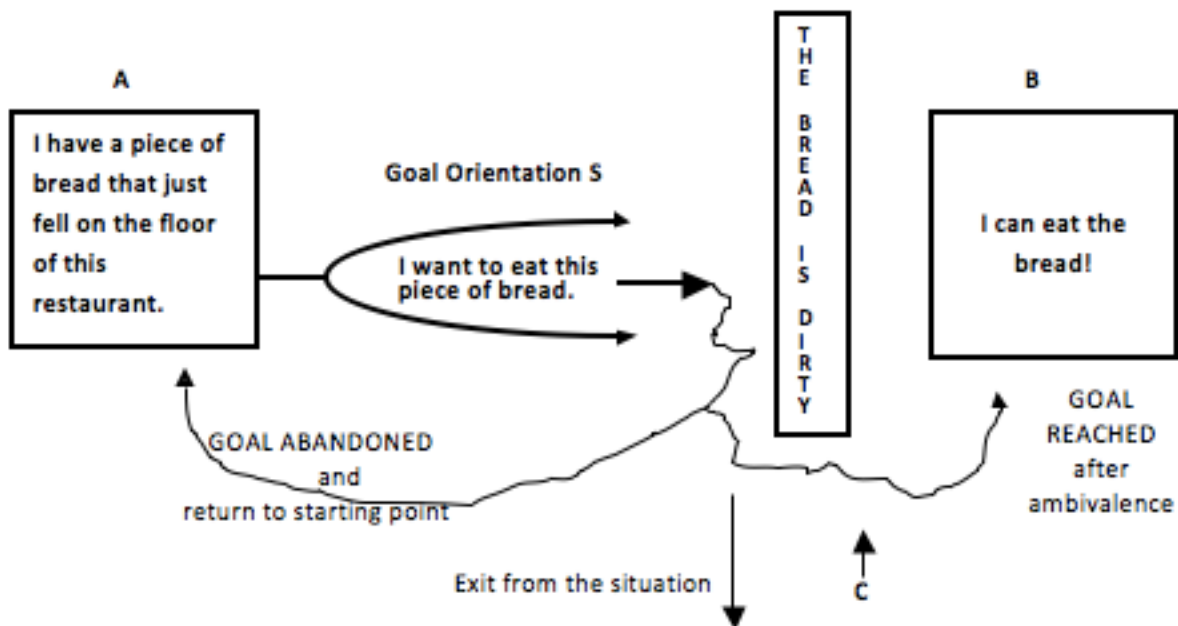
Figure 1: Negotiating with the semiotic block, adapted from (Valsiner, 2007)

The mother had a few options once encountering the block in meaning. She could have: thrown the bread away, left the bread on the ground, directed her hunger to another food source… etc. These methods of dealing with the block by *not* dealing with the block—abandoning goals of meaning construction, not worrying about the dirt content in relation to the edibility of bread—are *behavioral exit strategies*. Exit strategies can be implemented as an alternative to circumvention, as actions taken to reset the goal orientation toward a path of meaning-making that does not involve [negotiation between bread and dirt]. No matter what—if she ignores the bread or throws it out—she has to pursue other meaningful actions such as dinner table conversation, ordering her entrée, or even just thinking to distract her from the bread conundrum. Whatever she decides, her exit strategy will be a means of avoiding the discomfort of the meaning block without actually dealing with it.

A pure exit strategy does not create an alternate meaning to circumvent a semiotic block, but some circumvention strategies serve as exit strategies. Circumvention strategies are equipped with varying levels of directness in negotiating with the semiotic block—some merely distance the meaning maker from the block in a similar way that an exit strategy does. It is important to clarify that due to the language-based nature of human thought and the two-sided nature of a clash of meaning, it is necessary to explain circumvention strategies (and meaning-making in general) in terms of an inner dialogue. The most indirect vocalized circumvention strategies use words to shift focus (of all meaning-makers privy to the situation) away from the contradiction at hand, sufficiently distancing those involved from the contradiction. Distancing oneself from the contradiction (the semiotic block) creates an opening for a quick exit from the situation.

To explain the exact structure of circumvention strategies in general, I will refer back to Valsiner and Joseph's example of the mother caught between meaning [wants to eat bread] and meaning [inedible because dirty]. I have already presented the first phase above.

This train of thought concludes with the mother asserting that because the bread is dirty, she should not eat it. This assertion of "one should not eat anything dirty," by virtue of its moralistic "should," is called a *macro organizer*. A macro organizer is an obvious or implicit moralistic general statement (moralistic in stating a "should" or "should not", based on some moral or ethical standard). It serves as a blanket statement that often has to power to override other considerations. Macro organizers are long lasting and rarely subject to change. They provide a stable foundation for decision-making, and guarantee some measure of stability throughout the otherwise vague and uncertain process of meaning making (Valsiner & Josephs, 1998). The macro organizer at hand [one should not eat

anything dirty], however, now stands in the way of the mother's newfound desire to eat that piece of bread that has just been labeled "dirty". Her attempts to circumvent this conflict of meaning [want to eat bread] with meaning [inedible because dirty] will be presented as variations of the following generic version of Phase 2 of the inner dialogue.

Types of circumvention strategies
There are ten types of circumvention strategies outlined by Valsiner and Josephs (1998), including "circumvention of meaning by focusing on semantic qualifiers", "circumvention of meaning by the introduction of symbolic helpers", and "circumvention of meaning by challenging one macro organizer with a competing macro organizer". The first two are examples of *indirect* circumvention strategies, which, as discussed above, serve to shift focus away from the semiotic block. The third is an example of a direct circumvention that neutralizes the block by introducing a more powerful moralistic imperative.

1. "Circumvention of meaning by focusing on semantic qualifiers": Semantic qualifiers are small qualifying words or statements within a verbalized meaning that induce a shift of focus to those words or statements, away from the meaning itself. These qualifiers blur the connection between the new, qualified, sentence and its original meaning, throwing doubt into whether that original meaning still applies—in this case whether the relevant macro organizer still applies (qualifiers in *italic*).

> Phase 2:
> 6) *Perhaps* the bread *might not be so* dirty.
> 7) I'll eat it. (Valsiner & Josephs, 1998, p.72)

2. "Circumvention of meaning by the introduction of symbolic helpers": symbolic helpers simply brush the meaning aside, providing an opening for an exit. A symbolic helper is a decontextualized catch-phrase that serves as a method of distancing the person from the situation, allowing them to escape the meaning block (Valsiner & Josephs, 1998, p. 74). These symbolic helpers often come in countless forms, such as "it is what it is", "well, it's just a piece of bread", "at least the sun will shine tomorrow," "ain't nothin' but a thing", etc.

> Phase 2:
> 6) Well, it's not the end of the world.

3. "Circumvention of meaning by challenging one macro organizer with a competing macro organizer": In this case, [one should not eat anything dirty]) can compete with a new macro organizer of a higher level of importance. This new macro organizer does not dispute the validity of the one it is challenging, but simply neutralizes it by introducing a more powerful moralistic imperative. The challenging macro organizer (below in *italic*) supersedes the previous one because it carries a greater moral weight than that of the health risks associated with eating bread that has fallen on a dirty floor.

Phase 2:
6) However, *one should never throw away anything which is actually edible.*
7) I'll eat the bread. (Valsiner & Josephs, 1998, p.72)

The circumvention strategies, which I have described above, are a central theoretical component of the Semiotic Switch. However, I have not explained the psychological discomfort that serves as the impetus for circumvention in the instance of a clash of emotionally-laden meanings.

Cognitive Dissonance
Dissonance and consonance are, in Festinger's words, "relations among cognitions—that is, among opinions, beliefs, knowledge of the environment, and knowledge of one's own actions and feelings" (1956, p.25). Dissonance can occur if two items, be they related to the outside world or to one's self-perception, are inconsistent with one another or if one does not logically follow from the other.

The dissonance of two incompatible cognitions produces a feeling of discomfort. A person experiencing cognitive dissonance will feel, as a result of the discomfort, a pressure to decrease the level of dissonance and increase the overall consonance in his/her mind (Festinger et al., 1956). Cognitive dissonance is the mental state that develops when experiencing a semiotic block. When the block is something trivial, such as a desirable piece of bread that has recently become dirty (assuming that the person is not ravenously hungry/mysophobic), the level of discomfort from the dissonance of "edible" (sign A) conflicting with "dirty" (sign B) is minimal. If, however, the meanings in conflict are particularly dissonant, the person will be too preoccupied with the high level of resulting discomfort to be able to effectively engage in meaning making elsewhere in his/her environment. The main focus of a conflicted person would be to reduce the uncomfortable dissonance, which cannot be done without employing a circumvention or exit strategy. The question still stands, however: what makes a person experiencing a semiotic block chooses one circumvention strategy over another? In answer to that question, I have outlined a semiotic mechanism that, when activated, results in the choice of circumvention strategy.

THE SEMIOTIC SWITCH
I have now provided and explained the theoretical background upon which my model of the Semiotic Switch rests. The theories presented can be synthesized to validate the conceptual existence of this switch model, which is proposed in the following way.

Basic Structure and Function
Subjective experience can be divided into two halves. One half is the Self. The Self is the emotion-based lens through which we see the world, colored by past experiences and future-directed predispositions. Each situation in that world is the second half; the room,

the lighting, the facial expressions of the people present, the immediate social context: the Other. The Other is everything relevant to the situation *other* than what a person brings in psychologically. It is precisely the relation of Self to Other that determines how the person will negotiate with that Other. They are in constant interaction and negotiation. When a person is confronted with a semiotic block, the relation of Self and Other will determine exactly how that person will go about dealing with the block—whether and how the person will circumvent it.

This process of relation culminates in a final state of situational relatedness. This state of relatedness serves as the catalyzing function of the Semiotic Switch. Upon achieving this final state of relatedness, the individual experiencing the block determines, based on the nature of his/her situational relatedness, which path he/she will take to reduce the dissonance (as throwing a physical switch determines what path the electrical current will take). The choice of which path is the activation of the Semiotic Switch—the action of the Switch being "thrown"—and the path itself takes the form of a circumvention strategy or an exit strategy.

How the "nature" of the individual's final state of situational relatedness will influence the choice of circumvention strategy depends entirely on the person. There is no generic model. Instead, case studies of the two participants from my study will be presented to exemplify the structure and function of the Semiotic Switch.

The Semiotic Switch model can be used to examine many decision-making processes. A person gathers the relevant information in the situation (the Other), processes it in relation to the relevant information stored in the Self, and makes a decision. If the situation at hand poses a semiotic block, the Switch directs the person towards circumvention or a quick exit.

Now, having explained the structure and function of the Semiotic Switch, along with the theoretical basis on which it rests, I can turn to my own study, which serves as an empirical example of the Semiotic Switch in action, in this case in a short time frame.

EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION

My initial focus, which served as the impetus for the creation of my experiment, was the study of the psychological processes behind "awkward" situations and the ways that people deal with them. The Semiotic Switch provide a conceptual explanation, but a need to test them empirically still exists. My research questions are: (1): How does a person semiotically deal with an awkward situation and (2): How does this vary as the setting placed by the researcher varies?

Method

Applying the methodology used to examine semiotic blocks (Valsiner, 2007) and personal constructions of awkward situations, I was able to construct an experiment in which participants would be confronted with a semiotic block, and their circumvention process (or exit) would be recorded on video.

Design
The experiment was a dual condition study, with an N=1 for each condition. Condition one examines a participant facing a meek researcher, anxious about the outcome of an experimentally created accusation of an ethical violation. Condition two examines a participant who faces a belligerent researcher, angry about the questioning of his ethical procedures. The two experimental conditions were drastically different, and therefore allowed the possibility for various circumvention/exit strategies to be seen.

Subject Pool
Participants were recruited from introductory Psychology classes at a northeast University under the pretense of conducting a study related to observing demeanor (body language, facial expression) through video recording as they fill out a questionnaire in regards to segments of modern song lyrics. Participants received participation credit within their class for participating in the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed through the proper handling and disposal of data once it had been analyzed and secure storage of consent forms.

Procedure
Participants were seated at a desk in full view of the camera. The participant was told that the researcher would be in the room if s/he has any questions. The questionnaire was designed so that the 6th question was comprised of racially charged lyrics (see Appendix A). Once the participant finished, a follow-up portion of the pretense-study began in which questions pertaining to the participant's answers on the questionnaire were asked. Soon after, a confederate researcher bursts into the room, asking if the participant had finished the questionnaire. The confederate informs both researcher and participant that the advisor had been reading over the questionnaire and found the aforementioned question (the racially charged one) to be highly inappropriate and therefore *unethical*. The confederate, in a worried tone, stated that the advisor wished to speak with the researcher once the participant has left. The researcher then turns to the participants and asks whether or not they thought the question was inappropriate.

Coding
I used Interpretetive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Larkin et al., 2008) to analysis my participants' responses. I engaged with the data in an attempt to uncover the meanings underlying the words my participants used, trying "to understand the content and complexity of those meanings rather than measure their frequency. This involves the investigator engaging in an interpretive relationship with the transcript"

(Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 66). First, I examined the transcript of the dialogue between my participants and I, looking for both the parallels and the divergences between their word choices and their circumvention paths. Having categorized my participants' responses within the theoretical framework of circumvention strategies, "which positions the initial 'description' in relation to a wider...theoretical context" (Larkin et al., 2008), analysis of the data in its new context was conducted, synthesizing those semiotic blocks and circumvention strategies and expanding them in the concept of situational relatedness. From there I was able to create my own theoretical model, the Semiotic Switch.

Results

The Experiment's Block
Answering whether or not they thought the question was inappropriate poses a semiotic block for the participants whether they answer "yes" or "no". If they were to agree with the advisor and label the question as "inappropriate", they would be condemning the study and insulting the researcher as unethical and incompetent. The meaning [self as insulting] contradicts the commonly held meaning that people have for themselves [self as non-insulting]—a semiotic block. This block would cause some measure of cognitive dissonance if not effectively circumvented.

On the other hand, to deny that the question is inappropriate would be equal to aligning oneself with the "inappropriateness" of the song by the standards of the advisor. Claiming that a song labeled by an authority figure as "inappropriate" is *not* inappropriate implies an acceptance of the material; and therefore a challenge towards the advisor in his assessment of unethical. A person who answers the question with "no" has acquired the meaning of [accepts material that is unethical by the standards of one learned in ethics]. Few people would align themselves with practices deemed unethical without some trepidation. It would be in conflict with the generally held meaning [self as ethical], also causing a semiotic block.

To preserve their anonymity, the participants are referred to as Participant L and Participant R.

Condition 1: Experimenter as Victim

Condition Description
My demeanor throughout the portion of the study after the confederate brings the news was that of a worried young researcher who had no idea that he'd be in trouble. I replaced Sign A [researcher as in control] with Sign B [researcher as distressed]. My confederate, while playing her part, spoke rapidly and used vague terms "super racist" and "really, really, bad". The word on which she placed the most emphasis was "pissed", referring to the advisor.

Phenomological outline

The participant immediately asks me which question was the problematic one. I point it out, citing the artist and reciting a few words from the chosen sample of lyrics. Her response is a simple "It's just a song," accompanied by a shrug. After a brief discussion of the answers on her questionnaire, I sigh and say "But it is very racially charged, that didn't bother you?" She responds with "Most rap songs are, so no".

"It's just a song"

Having just been confronted with the emergence of [researcher as distressed], her response to my identification of the crucial lyrics was "it's just a song". Her assertion of "It's just a song" is an example of "circumvention of meaning by the introduction of symbolic helpers". In this case, Participant L was using the symbolic helper "It's just a song" to distance me, the primary component of her Other, from the emergent meaning [self as unethical researcher] by downplaying the song's gravity (by virtue of the "just"), and whatever unethical properties that song may have. Additionally she managed to distance *herself* from potential alignment with meaning [accepts material deemed unethical] with which she would otherwise be aligned by not condemning my study as unethical. Participant L accomplished this by implying that by being *just a song*, the material is not significantly unethical.

This situation, seen through the eyes of Participant L, constitutes the Other. The discrete components of the Other, in this case, are:

1. Researcher showing overt signs of distress
2. Cause of distress—breach of research ethics by way of song lyrics
3. Vague terms of condemnation

Situational factors 1 and 2 *oriented the participant away from the option to condemn my study as unethical, and towards the option of disagreeing with the advisor's assessment of the material as inappropriate*. The label of "inappropriate"—and therefore a property of being unethical—attached to the crucial song lyrics, in the context of her meaning [self as ethical] *oriented the participant towards a means of disagreeing with the advisor's assessment of the material as inappropriate with minimal alignment with unethical practices.*

Participant L had carved her situational relatedness out of relatively vague circumstances. The meaning [inappropriate/unethical] had been placed on the crucial lyrics by the confederate, saying that my advisor was "freaking out" about the lyrics in a rushed, vague, mumbled manner. The unethical nature of the lyrics loomed as an undefined aspect of the Other. Other than that, she had no clear information on the matter in her verbal attempt to help me avoid accountability. Therefore, having no information within her Self to bolster her defense of me, and enough of a desire to leave her meaning [self as ethical]

unchallenged, she was *oriented toward deferred to a simple, indirect circumvention strategy that downplayed the offense of the lyrics by referring to its status as a song* (status as song being the only piece of information she had). Figure 2 displays her process of relation to the situation of my ethical breach, resulting in her choice of "circumvention of meaning by the introduction of symbolic helpers".

Referring to Figure 2, options 2 and 3 are present to display the alternative paths that Participant L could have taken in circumventing the meaning block. This format of the arrow in bold signifying the option that the meaning-maker selects, with other options present, will be standard presentation of the Semiotic Switch model.
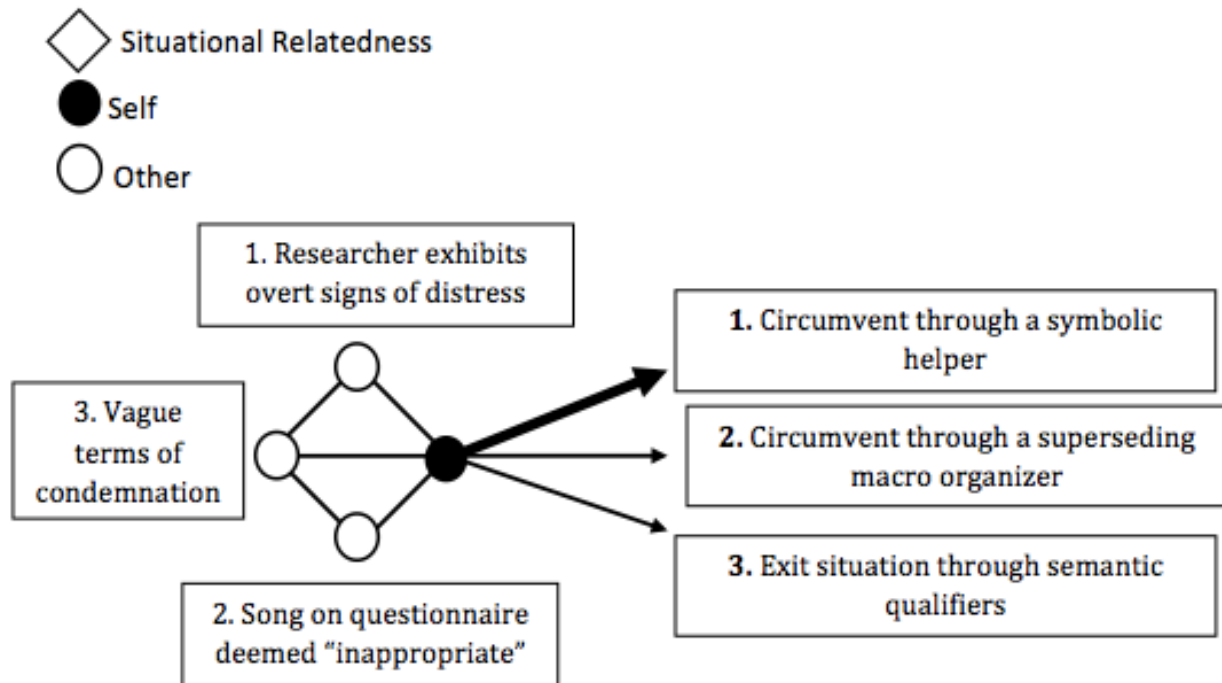

Figure 2: The Semiotic Switch, applied to Participant L's circumvention process

"Most rap songs are [racially charged]"

After acknowledging "It's just a song" and briefly inquiring into her word choice on the questionnaire, I stated that the song was "very racially charged…that didn't bother you?" The participant's response was that "most rap songs are, so no". The information of [racial charge] replaced [vague terms of condemnation] as the third component of the Other, to which she could relate and respond in the form of a more direct circumvention strategy. My reference to the song's "racial charge" was a new item of information that she was able to use to substantiate her circumvention tactics. This development *oriented her towards undercutting the problem of the song's racially charged nature*. All other previous components of Self and Other remained constant for this circumvention strategy, and I still

bore the meaning [researcher as distressed], so her circumvention attempts seemed to be directed toward helping to relieve my distress. In saying that most rap songs are racially charged, she effectively labeled the lyrics I had presented as "common". By granting the lyrics that had been labeled "inappropriate" and a quality of being "common", she was effectively claiming that racial content was expected in such lyrics, and therefore were not shocking. If the lyrics were not shocking, they had caused no offense, and therefore were not inappropriate. In imbuing the lyrics with a quality of being "common," she undercut their quality of "inappropriate", and destroyed the rationale behind any punishment that I was about to endure.

Participant L challenged the implicit macro organizer [one should not include racially charged material in a research setting] with a superseding macro organizer of [one should not be penalized for the inclusion of commonplace material]. If racially charged material is, in this case, commonplace, there is no reason *not* to include it in whatever setting. The original macro organizer had been invalidated. This challenge of macro organizers is an example of "circumvention of meaning by challenging one macro organizer by a competing macro organizer". Having already related the knowledge and predispositions of Self to the previously introduced components of the Other, Participant L used the new information of "racial charge"—a new component of the Other—as a base for a much more direct circumvention strategy. **Figure 3** displays this new dynamic in the form of the Semiotic Switch.
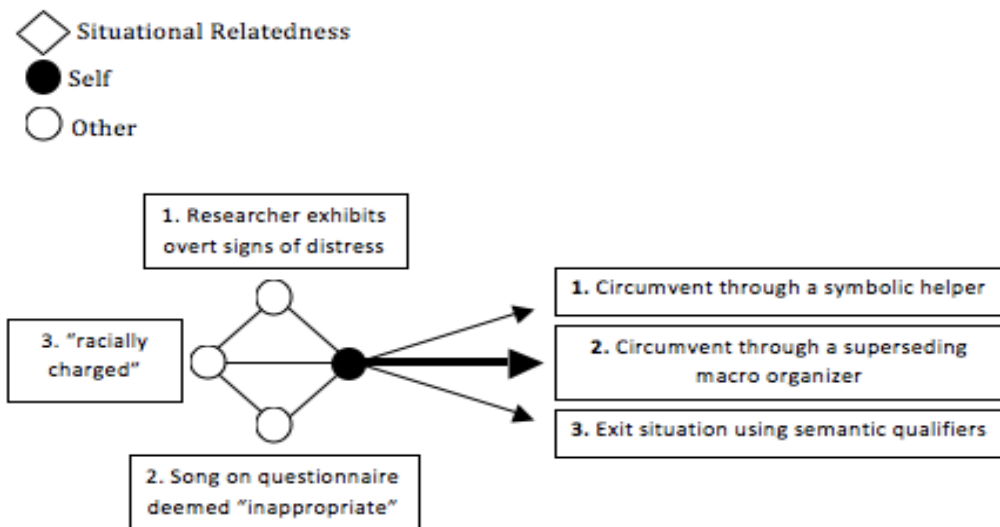

Figure 3: The Semiotic Switch, applied to Participant L's circumvention process

The following discussion of Participant R will exemplify the distinct difference that a different set of components of Other can make in a person's situational relatedness, and eventual choice of circumvention strategy.

Condition 2: Experimenter as Irritant

Condition Description
For this second participant, the role was drastically different compared to the Participant L condition. I did not create a meaning of [self as distressed researcher] in the eyes of the participant by acting scared and submissive once the confederate had brought the ill tidings. Instead, I took a hostile stance against my confederate and then turned to the participant with repeated variations of the question "are you sure the racist lyrics don't bother you?" The combination of this behavior and my impending ethical reprimand replaced my original Sign A [self as competent researcher], with Sign B [self as volatile and incompetent researcher].

The confederate's performance in this condition was inferior to the first in terms of believability—the participant claimed after debriefing that she had caught on to the ruse. She was therefore not seriously conflicted by the possibility of aligning herself with the meaning [self as unethical], because she did not find the experimentally created ethical breach convincing. However, the repeated question "are you sure the racist lyrics don't bother you?" following my angry outburst created a new semiotic block for her: her meaning [self as non-insulting person] clashed with her desire to escape the situation [researcher as volatile and incompetent].

Phenomological Outline:
The confederate's news was met immediately by anger and indignation on my part, and I stood arguing loudly and fruitlessly with him for about a minute. I turned to the participant and showed her the crucial question on the questionnaire. I read the lyrics aloud and ask if she (also female) thought they were inappropriate. She answers with a negative, saying that she wasn't offended. I proceed to ask her three similar questions: "Did it [provoke emotion] in you?", "[the lyrics] didn't bother you?", "You don't think this is racist?". All negative answers are given, concluding with "it's the artist's words". Once more I ask: "This didn't bother you?", and then a final, direct question of whether "Do you think I should change my study?" prompts a nervous laugh, and "I don't know if you should take my opinion." When I insist, after a brief pause she finally concedes: "I could see where 'slaves' and 'Caucasians' could be slightly offensive to somebody who would take it that way" (refer to Appendix A).

"It's the artist's words"

By continually pressing the participant for answers to a question that she had already answered, I further solidified the meaning [self as volatile, incompetent, researcher] that had emerged when I argued belligerently with the confederate. She had answered three of my repetitive probes with her opinion that she was not bothered by the lyrics and did not think they were racist. Her answer to the fourth of these questions, "it's the artist's words", warrants further examination.

To claim that since the words in my questionnaire were not my own and that I should not be penalized for them rests on the grounds of the macro organizer [one should not be penalized for including the words of another as material in a research setting]. This macro organizer, for her purposes, superseded the macro organizer of [one should not include racially charged material in a research setting]—the form of the circumvention strategy "circumvention of meaning by challenging one macro organizer with a competing macro organizer". The components of the Other that led her to this strategy were as follows:

1. Label of "inappropriate" attached to a question in my study
2. Researcher's outburst of anger at confederate
3. Irritating repetition of researcher's questions

My irritating and volatile behavior could only have *oriented the participant away from justifying my inclusion of unethical material in my study*. Furthermore, the meaning [inappropriate and therefore unethical] that had been attached to my study could only have served to orient her in the same direction. If she was suspicious at this point it certainly would not have oriented her towards justifying my use of any material in the study. Consequently none of these factors account for her decision to justify my inclusion of the lyrics in my research project. Based on these contents of the Other, the participant referenced the macro organizer of [one should not be penalized for including the words of another as material in a research setting]—not to circumvent a semiotic block that she was experiencing but instead to logically remove a macro organizer that she did not feel was applicable to the situation.

She disagreed with the assessment of the material as "inappropriate", and utilized the structure of "circumvention of meaning by challenging one macro organizer with a competing macro organizer" to *undercut* (as a form of circumvention) the meaning of that assessment. She received no external information of the Other that would have oriented her towards this position - it was solely the content of her Self that determined how she would respond to the question.

Answering the question was a goal that had nothing to do with her situational relatedness. Since her answer did not correspond with the influence of the other components of the Other, her process of relation to the situation is a simple input-output model: processing the meaning of the question, referring to the content of the Self for the answer, and

vocalizing the answer. There is no point in visually mapping out this instance of "throwing" the Semiotic Switch, as the diagram would be a simple straight line. However, the final seconds of the interview with Participant R yielded a clearly observable change in her relation to the situation.

"'Slaves' and 'Caucasians' could be slightly offensive to some."
Despite her logical and concise opinion, I continued to ask her whether she was offended, solidifying my emergent meaning [self as volatile and incompetent researcher]. Having pretended to ignore her statement of "it's the artist's words," I let out a sigh of exasperation, and ask her directly if I should change my study. She wonders aloud if she's the right person to give her opinion, and I tell her that she is.

Since the condition was designed to create a loud, aggressive, researcher for the participant to respond to, Participant R's patience with me had quickly worn thin. When she brought up the question of whether or not she was the right person to answer the question, she said it with a nervous smile and a bit of laughter in her voice, as if laughing at the ridiculousness of my persistence and implying "since you haven't accepted my answer yet, I don't see why you're still asking me…" When I asserted that she was exactly the right person to answer my question, she simply gave me the answer that she knew at that point I *would* accept. In a sentence as slow and deliberate as those previous, she presented me with a perfect example of "circumvention of meaning by focusing on semantic qualifiers": "I could see where 'slaves' and 'Caucasians' could be slightly offensive to somebody who would take it that way" (qualifiers underlined).

That final question had made it clear that I was not taking no for an answer. A meaning that had been lying beneath the surface of the situation suddenly emerged: the meaning [researcher fishing for a specific answer], which fully solidified the meaning that had been gradually emerging, [researcher as incompetent and volatile]. The full entrenchment of this meaning replaced her previously held meaning for the situation as [respectable research setting] with meaning [research setting not to be taken seriously]. No longer was she simply answering a question; because of her meaning [desire to escape the situation], housed in her Self and the meaning of the research setting (part of the Other) of [not to be taken seriously] Participant R was *oriented towards giving me the answer that she thought I wanted*. To give me such an answer served as a means of escaping the situation that was no longer worthy of honesty. At the same time she was *oriented towards giving the answer to me in such a way that she wouldn't be unequivocally condemning my study.* Though the premises of the study appeared at that point to be fake, that fakeness had not yet been revealed, so to fully condemn the lyrics in my questionnaire as racist could still be considered a direct insult, which would be dissonant with her previously held meaning [self as not an insulting person].

Participant R's main priority was to give me the affirmative answer that I seemed to be looking for. Given this state of affairs, her choice of "circumvention of meaning by focusing on semantic qualifiers" (using the qualifiers "I could see", "could be", "slightly", "to somebody" and "who would take it that way" to distance herself from her new position of condemning the question as "inappropriate") allowed her to avoid contradicting her meaning [self as not-insulting person], as she would with a direct condemnation of my study, while successfully telling me what I seemed to want to hear. It served as a means of exiting the situation that bore the emergent meaning [researcher as volatile and incompetent]. The semantic qualifiers served to distance herself from the meaning of her words, allowing herself to escape from the situation: serving ultimately as a *behavioral exit strategy*. Delineated in **Figure 4**.
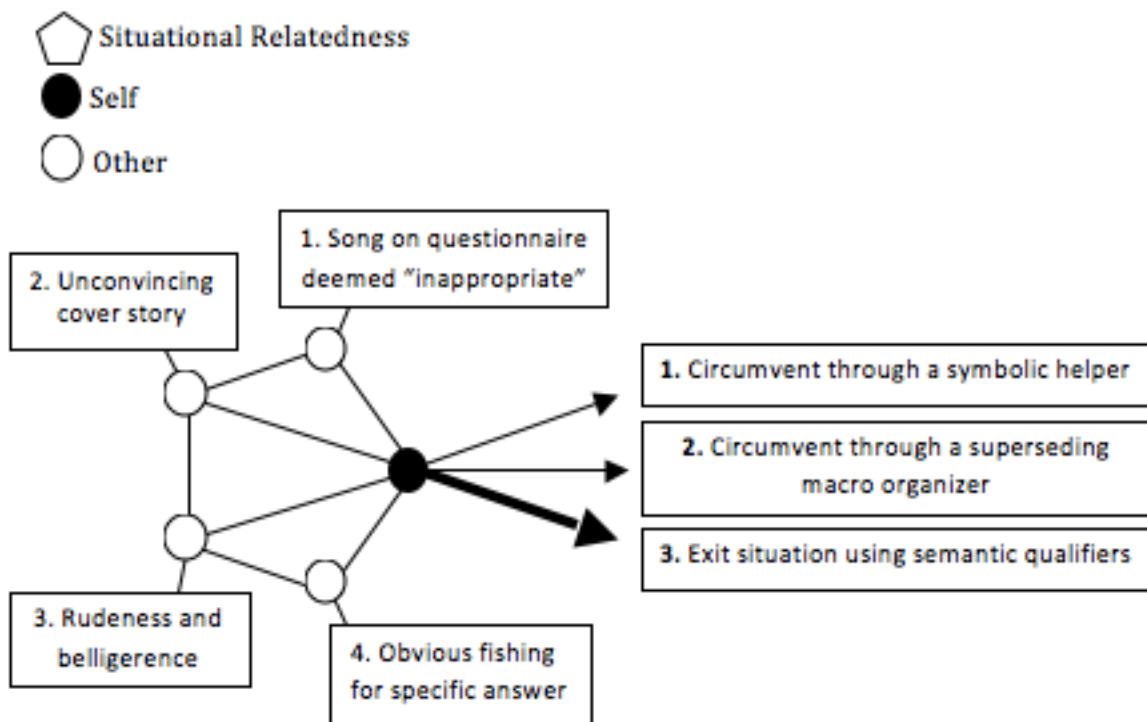

Figure 4: The Semiotic Switch, applied to Participant R's circumvention process

The case of Participant R demonstrates the wide variety of forms that situational relatedness can take. When her priorities, housed in her Self, were aligned with a simple answer to a question, with no cause to react to the annoying and unconvincing components of the Other that a researcher was presenting her with, she was able to ignore those components completely in order to achieve her goal. When, however, the presence of the

Other became too irksome to ignore, she rearranged her priorities according to a new component of the Other, rearranged her relation to the situation, and made her decision—throwing the Semiotic Switch. Perhaps the second of silence before her use of the semantic qualifiers was the second that it took for her to change psychological gears and prepare herself with a new approach to the situation. This versatility of relation to moment-to-moment situations is as unlimited as the variety of situations we find ourselves in every day of our lives.

CONCLUDING POINTS

A person in conflict is a fleeting phenomenon. The human mind does not allow for the perpetual process of meaning making to be obstructed for long, and if the obstruction cannot be overcome, the mind will always find a way to compensate. Without meaning, we would be smothered by a tidal wave of sensation that would be impossible to comprehend. Things that we encounter in our daily lives, after all, only bear their status as "things" because we attribute that status to them. Given the inconceivable layers of meanings that comprise our moment-to-moment experience (the clear plastic item on my desk is a "water bottle"—even the notions of clear, plastic, item, desk, and mine are meanings we have constructed), we are only able to effectively negotiate with our ever-changing environment because we rely on semiotic mechanisms that lend order to our experience. These mechanisms serve a variety of purposes in clarifying our experiences and facilitating effective action. The mechanism that I have outlined functions as a guide based on the relation between what we (as meaning-making agents) experience externally, which I have given the overarching name of the Other, and the wealth of facts, experiences, and emotional associations that I have named the Self. I have named the mechanism the Semiotic Switch.

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APPENDIX A
Section of the questionnaire administered to participant. The crucial question is #6.
Read the following excerpts of lyrics from contemporary musicians carefully. Respond to each section with one to two sentences.

For section a) describe your initial emotional reaction to the given lyrics
For section b) venture a guess as to what emotions the artist intends to evoke
For section c) based on the nature of the lyrics, what do you think the genre of this song is?

4.) Passed out on the overpass
Sunday best and broken glass
Broken down from the bikes and bars
Suspended like spirits over speeding cars

a)_____
_____
b)_____
_____
c)_____

5.) Life's too short to be sittin' round miserable
People gon' talk whether you doing bad or good, yeah
Got a drink on my mind and my mind on my money, yeah
Looking so bomb gonna find me a honey

a)_____
_____
b)_____
_____
c)_____

6.) I'm from where they overthrow democratic leaders
Not for the people but for the Wall Street Journal readers
From where blacks, indigenous peoples and Asians were once
Slaves of the Caucasians and it's amazing how they trained them
To be racist against themselves in a place they were raised in
And you kept us caged in

a)_____
_____
b)_____
_____
c)_____
_____