“And there went great multitudes with him; and he turned, and said unto them, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Gospel according to Luke 14:26).

“You must always take the phrases of the Evangelist literally, if you don’t it’s obvious you won’t understand anything--people think that it is ironic” (Jacques Lacan, 1991, p. 154).

Introduction
This paper is a close reading of a “textlet,” a snippet of dialogue: the last ninety-seven lines of the transcript of the video of Laing and Leila’s interaction. This video provides a florid example of Laing the existential psychotherapist in action. My analysis will investigate how the interlocutors’ speech acts change the participants, particularly Leila. The questions that orient my interpretation are “do people change?” and “how is such change effected in and by the participants’ language usage?”

I want to explore how, as a result of Laing’s conversational choices, his discourse with Leila is unusual. Laing presents us with a particular challenge because his practice, both when witnessed in action and to some extent when formulated in theory, can seem opaque, obscure, and rather mystical. As the New York Times reported, “the interview seemed to be no more than mere conversation” (A. C. Laing, 1994, p. 224). This already suggests that the demonstration was a departure from what was expected, albeit in the direction of what the reporter considered “mere conversation.” I shall be concerned with a number of respects in which Laing’s manner of interacting is a departure from what is generally considered typical for a therapist. A quick glance at the transcript will show several occasions where the discourse is rather strange. My interpretation will, I hope, show how even seemingly irrational talk has rational consequences for the participants.

In particular, I shall examine Laing’s citation of a verse from the New Testament’s Gospel according to Luke. My aim is to elucidate how Laing’s rather startling citation of this passage takes skillful advantage of the relationship between
two of the contexts that have been invoked in the discourse—the contexts of family and Christianity (see Bortle’s paper in this issue). With this citation, Laing displays a recognition of the overlap or lamination of the two contexts. Citation—and reported speech in general—brings about transposition of the indexical ground of discourse (Hanks, 1996, p. 212). I shall argue that Laing’s citation is skillfully designed to function as a pragmatic shortcut. It shifts the deictics and so accomplishes ontological work.

The expected in discourse

Therapy, both as a practice and a professional culture, has developed its own specific voices, with recurring themes and topics that are considered not only appropriate, expected and encouraged, but normative and necessary, so that their absence leads to negative sanctions. One way of talking and thinking about what is expected in therapeutic discourse is in terms of “genre.” A genre is a “set of prescribed speech roles and a specially organized physical space of speaking. Indeed the genre... is what appears to give substance and continuity to the social interactions in which the texts are produced, and therefore, to the broader social order” (Silverstein & Urban, 1996, p. 8). On a number of occasions Laing appears to violates the genre of therapeutic discourse; this is presumably one reason the event was reported as more like “mere conversation,” and why the conference audience was divided in its reaction to what was witnessed. But his violation can be shown to have its own logic.

Another way to consider what is expected in discourse is in terms of the “roles” involved. Laing’s interactional style displays an interesting oscillation between acceptance and contestation of the role of therapist. He forges a different path for therapeutic conversation possibilities.

We can also think about what is expected in conversation in terms of “turn-type preallocation” (Nofsinger 1991, p. 106). Both therapist and client are generally constrained in the kind of action they can produce in their conversational turns. For example, therapists typically employ open-ended yet leading questions, silence, and continuers such as “yeah...” or “uhm” which encourage the client to take an extended turn in the discourse. At times Laing speaks more like a client, for example in lines 216-235 most of the disclosures of personal beliefs and the like are performed by Laing, while Leila responds with utterances such as “well, just tell me that” (227). In the course of the demonstration Laing not only offers unusual self-disclosure, he also insists on the reality of a paranoid conspiracy and, last but not least, cites a passage from the Christian bible. At times such as these it is hard to tell who is the client and who the
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It is hardly necessary to note that this observation would undoubtedly have delighted Laing, who consistently sought to deconstruct, debunk, or reverse the typical use of these terms.

For example, Laing begins the conversation simply saying he can hear Leila, commenting on the sound logistics (1-3). Leila replies, “He says when you when you try to torture him, he’s going to get, get a parachute and bail out” (4). Leila’s utterance is out of step with the normal moves we might expect. When Laing responds, “Uh, huh. To the nether regions” (6) his continuer of her odd utterance is quite unexpected for a therapist performing a demonstration on therapeutic technique. We immediately notice that Laing’s speech is extraordinary and mirrors Leila’s in its unusualness. We can also see that Laing and Leila’s discourse reverses the roles of therapist and client. The blurring of participants’ roles functions as a device that allows for a progressive union between Laing and Leila. By trading roles and poetically sharing a common language, they gradually come together in the conversation.

**Economical interactional work**

Let me focus on that point in the transcript when the topic turns to Leila’s relationship with her parents. In line 329, Leila declares, “Well, ’cause maybe they hate me after all I, after being an unfaithful daughter.” This utterance, the second part of an adjacency pair, can be considered a response both to Laing’s immediately preceding question “Why wouldn’t it be okay?” to send a Christmas present to her parents (327) as well as to his somewhat earlier question, “How do they feel about you?” (307). These utterances are located in two contexts, that of Christianity and that of family. Bortle (this issue) has shown how these contexts have been invoked earlier in the conversation. To recap, Laing first indexes Jesus, and in doing so invokes Christianity, at line 213 where the topic has been “the universal mind” and “conspiracy.” Leila has inquired, “are you a Christian?” (218). Now, talk of Leila’s family has invoked Christianity again, as she describes her father as “a Christian preacher.” Laing gently questions Leila on her relationship with her parents. Her replies are punctuated with frequent sighs and declarations of “I don’t know.” But she offers a narrative that portrays estrangement: she hasn’t visited in years, and even wrote asking permission to send her parents “a Christmas present” (312). And her reference here again invokes the same two contexts. Christmas is, in many cultures, a family gathering and a time for exchange of gifts among relatives. But Christmas is also, of course, a celebration in the calendar of the Christian religion. These two contexts continue to appear together in the conversation, and I aim to demonstrate that
their entwining enables economical interactional work to be accomplished by Laing, albeit in ways that challenge our preconceptions and expectations about the conduct of therapy.

Leila’s next several utterances are what we might expect from a client. Her next move is not unusual; she stays within the therapeutic genre, in, for example, her reference to a desire to “have my own life” (337) and for her parents to “understand” this:

336 L: And, in fact, and I don’t communicate well well with
337 them either. But, you see, I have my own life to live.
338 Ea, you know, I hope they understand that, but maybe
339 they don’t.

But Laing’s next turn seems to exceed or even violate the genre and what we may expect from a therapist:

340 T: Uuhuh. Well, if you’re faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ,
341 how can you be unfaithful to your father?
342 L: Yeah.

Laing’s citation in 340 is not explicit. But a little research, for those of us not familiar with the New Testament, shows that Laing is citing the bible, specifically the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 14, verse 26. What is accomplished by Laing invoking this gospel? What is he doing by saying this? In order to understand we must first turn to, explore, and flesh out the context that is semiotically indexed. What is referenced by this particular verse, which shall engage and further their conversation until its close?

Laing, in his citation, is speaking as one Christian to another. He can do this because of the previous work. They have already invoked the context of Christianity, so that it has become a ground upon which both can stand as Christians, albeit of a particular type. In line 213, Laing first introduced Christ. When Leila asks Laing if he is a Christian (218), Laing replies:

“I’m a Christian in the sense that Jesus Christ wasn’t eh crucified isn’t wasn’t crucified between two candlesticks in a cathedral, he was crucified in the town garbage heap between two thieves, in that sense I’m a Christian” (222-226) and shortly continues:

“In that sense, I’m a Christian.... But, I mean in another in another sense I mean I I wouldn’t admit to being eh a Christian in most Christian company” (230-232).
Let’s unpack this a little. The “candlesticks” index, part-for-whole, the interior of a cathedral: a setting with stained glass, alters, crucifix and perhaps a glowing Jesus in white robes. Laing’s utterance displays a rejection of this form of Christianity and an identification instead with a more radical reading of the biblical narrative. The “garbage heap” and “two thieves” is a reference, again part-for-whole, to Luke 23:33:

“And when they were come to the place, which is called the skull [Golgotha], there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.”

This passage tells of a debate over who will sit on the right and left hand of Jesus when he is crucified: Peter or John? Instead the choice, intended to humiliate, is two thieves, two outcasts. By aligning himself with this narrative of the crucifixion, Laing indicates that his Christianity is rooted in and among the cast-offs of society, with the thieves in the garbage heap. This, Laing suggests, is the way in which he is a Christian.

Laing is drawing a distinction between two different types of Christian, or two different ways of being a Christian. One—“most Christian company”—is caught up in the trappings and ceremony of religion (“candlesticks in a cathedral”). The other acknowledges Christ’s fortitude in the face of humiliation, torture, and death.

By adopting this radical position in the Christian context, Laing makes a connection with Leila. We know that she is involved with the Phoenix CHAPS program, which provides food and shelter to the mentally ill and homeless. When Laing aligns himself with the Christ who suffers amongst outcasts, he aligns himself with Leila and simultaneously positions her as important and worthy. And note also Laing’s “If I’m talking to you?” (221) which implies he will be honest with her, while he would “not admit” his identity to “most Christian company.” Furthermore, to speak of being a Christian “in [this] sense” also suggests a contrast with Leila’s father.

Next he asks:

232 T: Why are you a Christian?
233 L: Hell no!
234 T: Eah eah?
235 L: I don’t think so....

Leila won’t, or can’t, say unambiguously whether or not she is a Christian. Her initial “Hell no!” is amusingly self-contradictory (since hell is a Christian concept). Her weary “I don’t think so” echoes her earlier displays of uncertainty and confusion.
This work has resulted in the accomplishment and recognition that Leila and Laing share a “membership category.” Schegloff (1972) articulates the cooperative work that must be accomplished in conversation for a successful reference to occur. Membership, the “who-we-know-we-are,” is the second “order of consideration” to aid in the investigation of “contextual frames.” (The other two are “location” and “topic.”) Membership has been described as the “multiplicity of ways in which participants take into account the particulars of who they are talking to, and the event they are engaged in, in the organization of their action” (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992, p. 192).

When participants in a conversation select a reference they do so in a way informed by their own and their interlocutor’s membership category. Laing and Leila have come to position themselves as Christian.

In this way, Laing and Leila have established their shared and mutual familiarity with the Christian context. Laing has positioned himself as a radical Christian, Leila as a skeptical one (“I think God doesn’t know what he is doing”). But it seems not to be until line 292 that Leila gives us, and Laing, an opportunity to grasp the underlying basis of her ambivalent and confused positioning. Now, as Laing and Leila talk about the bible passage, they speak within a here-and-now enriched and informed by both the Christian context and that of family. And each now knows something of how the other is positioned within each these contexts.

Sanity, madness, and the family

We can gain access to a still deeper reading or interpretation of this portion in the transcript. In order to better understand the force and effect of Laing’s utterances we can turn to his published writing about insanity and what he purports to do in therapy. This provides access to Laing’s “forestructure” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 192); what he brings with him, as author, theorist, practitioner, even cult figure.

A common thread running through Laing’s writing is his attempt to make madness comprehensible. His perspective is an existential-phenomenological one, and he is particularly interested in investigating the experiences of people considered by society as “mad,” his special focus being those who have “already begun a career as a schizophrenic” (Laing & Esterson, 1964, p. 13). Laing insists that he does not take the term schizophrenic lightly. In the preface to the second edition of their book, Laing and Esterson claim that schizophrenia is not a fact, it is merely a hypothesis, and “nor do we adopt it” (p. viii).

Laing viewed the self very much as formed in relationship to others, a notion that resonates with Heidegger’s (1927/1962, p. 149) analysis of “being-with” as a
fundamental characteristic of human being. He was concerned with the struggle each individual must experience between their essential “true self” and various harmful deforming forces. To some extent these inimical forces are located within the individual: the “false self,” for example, is a part of the individual that fights against the integrity of the whole (Laing, 1960). But Laing also looked beyond the individual for the enemy, and saw interaction with others as largely responsible for pathology (Laing, 1961). Laing was influenced by the work of Gregory Bateson (1956), who described people as laying traps for each other in the form of “double-bind” paradoxes (cf. Hwang, this issue). Laing also drew from H. F. Searles’ work, particularly his paper titled “The effort to drive the other person crazy” (1959). Laing and Esterson (1964) delved into the realm of pathological communication within the family, and the deforming pressures of familial interactions. Their interest was how people “may change quite remarkably as they become different others-to-others” (p. 6), for “not the individual but the family is the unit of illness” (p. 9). They showed how family dynamics and strategies such as emotional blackmail, parental misattribution, the continuous setting of traps, and even (and for our purposes, importantly) attempts to be kind, drove the daughters studied into madness. These dynamics were shown to occur frequently amongst families of schizophrenics. In “The Politics of Experience” (1967) Laing extended his analysis again, describing society as that which binds us.

Translations and alignments

In the light of Laing’s writing we can return to our interpretation of Laing’s citation of the bible and the contextual invoking it involves. What is Laing doing by responding to Leila’s talk about communication and relationship problems with her parents by invoking again the context of Christianity, and in particular citing this Gospel passage? For what transformative purpose is this particular referent employed? Is he, perhaps, implying a parallel between pursuing the Kingdom of Heaven and choosing one’s own path? Is he implying that one must let go of familial connections, seemingly benevolent but actually malevolent, if one is to be free and maintain one’s integrity, even one’s sanity? Although Laing’s citation may at first glance seem an odd move we can, looking closer, see the work being done here. He has transposed the ground of the conversation once again from family to Christianity or, more accurately, to both. Notice, for example, how Laing is taking the word “unfaithful,” which Leila first employed in the family context, and using it in the context of Christianity—but in order to speak about family.
Laing has not identified the source of his words. Indeed only the preamble to his next utterance—“But, eh, I mean he said that didn’t he?”—indicates that the words are not his own. To someone not well versed in the bible this utterance would be opaque. But Leila knows her bible, (and his utterance is designed for a “knowing recipient”; note its repair), and she can identify his referent; for example, that “He” here refers to Christ.

Laing’s employment of such a minimally identified citation might seem risky. Leila had to share a rich amount of contextual background with Laing in order to pick up on, work with, and elaborate his reference and thus further the conversation. If the reference had failed, Laing’s utterances would have misfired and alignment would have been disturbed. And indeed, some repair does prove necessary.

In fact, Leila appears to miss the point of Laing’s conversational move at line 336. She provides only a minimal conversational continuer, “Yeah” (cf. Nofsinger, 1991, p. 118, also Schegloff, 1982, pp. 80-81); it’s not clear that she ratifies his point. Laing has to do additional work to get his point across.

343 T: But, eh, I mean he said that didn’t he eh eh unless you
344     hate your father and mother and follow me, you can’t be
345     eh my disciple.
346 L: Yeahah.
347 T: What does your father make of that?
348 L: Well, probably that um all this, Ch, Christian emphasis
349     on family is a is a is against the teachings of Jesus. You
350     know, the modern the modern Christian emphasis on
351     families.
352 T: Yeah, I think it is, um.

Laing continues to draw from the Christian context to relate to and align himself with Leila.

The word which occasions Laing and Leila’s discussion from 352 to 366 is the verb “hate,” a translation from the Greek miseo. The verb miseo is a strong one, arguably deliberately so. Its use emphasizes that the separation from the external forces that prevent someone from doing what God wants is a difficult task. Freeing oneself from worldly and societal ties and expectations might seem like hate and, moreover, may even feel like hate. Laing’s utterance point to a difficult, uncomfortable truth: the external things and the people who love you and whom you may love can hold you back and so become detrimental to your true path, to the search for integrity. One has to obtain release from these external dependencies in order to be free.
Luke 14: 26 points to some damage potentially done in the familial home and offers the suggestion to one separate oneself from this context. In the Gospel verse Laing cites, Jesus’ words are reported, but the result is ambiguous. Jesus says that someone cannot be his disciple, and fix their attention on God, without coming across to their family as hateful. The family, in their love and need, and in their expectations, will want one to stay with them. However, the demands that Christianity makes are not compatible with those of parents, siblings, and spouses. Indeed, society’s expectations and demands, transmitted through these loved ones, through these relations, hold the person hostage and prevent them from truly following Jesus. Thus in order to be a disciple and follow the Christian path one must break free.

The ensuing conversation between Laing and Leila ostensibly centers on the translation of this word. Laing first offers the alternative “prefer” (359). Leila says she does not “recall that it said hate” (360), and offers “deny” (362):

352 I mean I don’t ea ea I d’you
353 know that passage ea ea where where Je Jesus I I
354 always said thought there was something wrong with
355 that translation that said eh eh said unless you eh the the
356 ah unless you hate your father and mother, brother and
357 sisters also it said said you cannot be my disciple. In
358 the English version though, I think it means unless you
359 prefer me to your father and mother.
360 L: I don’t recall that it said hate.
361 T: Hurh.
362 L: It’s eh (3) something like deny.
363 T: Yeah, ah, I asked a guy eh a Aramaic scholar about that
364 he said he thought it meant unless you are happily
365 indifferent to them.
366 L: Um. That makes a lot of sense.

Their negotiation ends in alignment, agreement on the phrase “happily indifferent” (363-371). The biblical injunction has thus been retrospectively softened: one does not need to “hate” ones family, merely be “happily indifferent” to them.

Call his bluff
366 L: That makes a lot of sense.
367 T: Yeah [L laughs] (call his bluff)
In line 366 we glimpse the effect of the work accomplished in the discussion around the biblical passage. Leila declares, “That makes a lot of sense.” She is evidently open to the possible benefit and importance of being “happily indifferent” to one’s family. With this utterance Leila displays recognition that family dynamics may indeed be hindering, and that she might benefit from distancing herself from her family.

Laing replies “Yeah. (Call his bluff)” in line 367. Two possibilities can be suggested here. The first is that Laing is suggesting that Leila call Jesus’ bluff and challenge the (seemingly benevolent, but likely malevolent) hold her family has on her. In the light of Laing’s theories, an interpretive researcher may well have grounds to read the utterance this way. Or the “his” in line 367 may refer to Leila’s father. The question is, which context does the utterance presuppose? Our answer will serve to disambiguate the indexical. On the second reading, Laing is pointing out to Leila that by following Jesus’ teachings to be “happily indifferent” to one’s family, and to follow God, she would be calling her father’s bluff.

What would it mean to say her father is bluffing? If her father is a sincere Christian preacher, a truly religious man (not one of those who just “say they are”) then he can only be pleased that Leila is comporting herself in accordance with the teachings of the Gospels. If, on the other hand, he disapproves of her conduct he will have shown himself to be an insincere Christian, a hypocrite who fails to practice what he preaches. In either case, Leila can afford to stop worrying about what her parents think of her. Regardless of her parents’ actual reactions to her, she is doing what a “faithful” Christian--and so also what the “faithful” daughter of a Christian preacher--ought to do.

In response to Leila’s gloss that one is in for trouble if one is not “happily indifferent” to one’s parents, Laing responds “that’s right” (line 371). With her recognition she has, according to Laing, got it “right.” We thus witness a transformation: reduced ontological insecurity (see Bortle, this issue, for discussion of this). Leila, in line 330, had characterized herself as an “unfaithful daughter,” one who “perhaps” has earned the hatred of her family. By the end of the interaction Leila has displayed a grasp of the way that she is, in a profound way, actually faithful, just as much as or perhaps more so than her father. She has moved, shifted positions, from understanding herself as “unfaithful” to being “happily indifferent,” and the weight of the problem of being a bad daughter, formerly heavy upon her shoulders, has been shifted to her parents.
Conclusions

To recapitulate: Laing’s citation of a passage from the Bible is one of the unusual things he does with words in this demonstration. It achieves an impressive array of communicative work. Basso, for example, makes the point that “language consists in shared economies of grammatical resources with which language users act to get things done,” so that “verbally mediated realities are densely textured and incorrigibly dynamic” (1980, pp. 172-173).

A “full variety of communicative functions” (Basso, 1980, p. 143) is served by Laing’s citation, which acts as a conversational short-cut. Multiple effects are achieved simultaneously by this short-cut: the citation and subsequent debate over translation help sustain alignment and a ground to stand on, a turn towards respect for one’s ‘true self,’ an affirming of moral precepts, and perhaps most importantly, therapeutically they serve to bring about personal transformation, in this case the transformation in Leila’s positioning in relation to her parents. The therapeutic result is evidenced by the way she comports herself on the stage during the question and answer session that followed the demonstration.

In this discussion with the conference audience Laing remarked that Leila, a supposedly paranoid schizophrenic, was now no longer exhibiting symptoms. The change, he pointed out, had come not from medication but through the interpersonal interaction, in, by and through language, between the two of them. Laing and Leila were able to explore the possibility that being “happily indifferent” to her family would be beneficial to her, and transform her positioning in relation to her parents. Indifference does not render her a bad Christian, but the opposite. By bringing in Christ’s injunction that his disciples “hate” their families and free themselves from ties that bind, Laing allowed Leila to grasp the possibility that distancing herself from her family will likely be beneficial. Laing’s citing of the Bible fostered change in Leila. Laing’s talk, and the talk called forth from Leila, effected a transformation in Leila’s positioning in relation to her family and her grasp of herself.

In this paper my investigation of the demonstration has employed tools of conversation analysis but has also been informed by reference to Laing’s published writings on the role of family dynamics in the genesis of schizophrenia. My interpretation has sought to provide a systematic articulation of Laing’s interaction with Leila that starts with our original, unreflective understanding but moves beyond this, (cf. Packer, 1985). By taking into account Laing’s theories on the way family dynamics can constitute and perpetuate mental affliction we can better interpret the therapeutic effect of his biblical citation. We begin to see the method in the madness of
his ways. I hope this analysis has displayed the rewards of attempting to make intelligible and meaningful what upon first glance seems bizarre and unexpected (and here the interpretive researcher parallels what Laing himself does). This hermeneutic method of analysis looks at psychotherapeutic processes in action, as a text that must be read on multiple levels.
Notes
1 For issues concerning Biblical interpretation, I am grateful to Matthew Baldwin, Ph.D. candidate University of Chicago Divinity School, for his consultation.

2 Basso explores how something as apparently simple as a place name can be used to accomplish interactional work, and demonstrates that names are highly charged, functioning in an elliptical manner to evoke emotions. Names too work as conversational short cuts. Basso insists we must attend to the “full variety of communicative functions served by acts of naming in different social contexts” (p.143).
References


