RE-CENTERING CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE
IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION: CONFLICT, CULTURE, AND KNOWLEDGE

Language explains…and language obscures. Take the word "we": it can identify a meaningful group, but it can also submerge important differences in assumed likeness.

"Conflict resolution" is one of those phrases denoting a category that different people understand in very different ways. Yet many people, and many textbooks about conflict resolution, assume a uniform meaning: "A process involving a neutral third party who facilitates not the content but the form of a dialogue so that the parties to a dispute can arrive at a settlement of their own making, to which they both/all agree."

What is Conflict Resolution?

For the editors of this volume, and for many of the authors who appear here, several parts of this definition are questionable.

- Is there such a thing as neutrality, and if so, is it desirable? Can a dialogue in the midst of conflict ever be facilitated without regard to the content? Is settlement always the most desired end to the process, or are there times when changes to the relationships among the people involved are more important? Behind these questions lie a thick bunch of deeper questions, touching on matters of culture, power and knowledge:
- Who decides the meaning and definition of conflict resolution and when? How does the meaning of conflict resolution change in different settings – a school playground, for instance, versus a court of law, versus an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission hearing on a matter of discrimination?
- What happens when the work is defined by those in power (in this context, typically the authors of textbooks and training manuals or accredited researchers in prestigious universities) in ways that marginalize people with crucial ideas about social change, ideas that are evident only to them precisely because they *have* been marginalized?

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It was the afternoon of September 11, 2001. In the Multicultural Conflict Resolution class, students and teacher were still in substantial shock at the morning's attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. They were trying to talk about their feelings, but tempers ran high and the talk kept turning instead to what the American response should be.

"We need to understand the reasons behind terrorism," some students argued. "No, we need to strike back, fast and hard!" proclaimed others. Again and again, the teacher urged the students to return to their reactions rather than what should be done. "How was it for you to learn of the attacks?"

Suddenly, one young man, a vociferous advocate of, "We have to retaliate!", stopped in mid-sentence. "I just realized something," he said reflectively. "Today when I walked on campus, for the first time in my life I felt like an American." The class looked at him quizzically. "Every other time," he explained, "I knew I was an *African*-American, different from almost everyone I saw around me."

The African-American student's "we" had shifted in the face of an assault on U.S territory. The white students, a majority of the campus population, assumed a "we" that meant all members of the university community, while the young man in a minority had a sharply different understanding of the nature of that "we".

Whose "we" takes precedence is determined by relations of power in complex and often subtle ways. In each of these circumstances, people may come to conflict resolution from very different cultural experiences, very different social identities, very different takes on what's important, what's true, and what's legitimate. To discuss culture, practice, and knowledge in relation to each other is to talk about *politics*.

Thus, the meaning of conflict resolution changes depending on who is asking the questions, who is answering them and under what circumstances, and depending on who is listening as well. Information changes depending on who has the power and who has been marginalized – and who fits into each of those categories changes, too, depending on contexts and moments in history.

As we use the term in this book, conflict resolution is a way of seeking change, social justice, social responsibility, health, freedom, liberation and the elimination of oppression for all. Conflict resolution is a way to explore the solution from inside out and outside in. We understand that politics enter into every conflict resolution experience, but the ways in which that is true are not always addressed or expressly stated.

For those of us represented in this anthology, conflict resolution is about relationships and ways of approaching methods for problem solving. These relationships and approaches vary from one person to another, one family, business, community, country, society, culture to another, as they combine and recombine in a great variety of ways.

A conflict resolution practitioner needs to be an artist. To practice effectively involves an understanding of the human spirit and an appreciation for the many types of people in crisis, and the many ways they have of being in relationship. Conflict resolution is the art of creating or facilitating an appropriate process for the people in dispute to problem-solve together and, through that process, to reconstruct their relationships with each other. Yet many teachers and training programs do not include very important information, centering around culture, conflict, and politics, that lies at the heart of understanding how to do those things.

Why this anthology?

This anthology is a rich collection of papers by conflict resolution practitioners who conduct their practices in a wide variety of ways. Most of the authors are people of color, or, if white, have substantial experience working in multicultural settings. What appears as a conflict in one culture may be something else entirely in another. Intervention must of necessity take very different forms. People of one culture may be aware that others have different cultural experiences, but the details are likely to be hazy, the significance of different feelings and ideas unclear, as they were to the white students discussing 9/11. That absence of detail is especially true for those people whose cultural standpoint comes closest to the writers of textbooks and the teachers of how to practice, who most often are themselves culturally grounded in a hegemonic cultural and political center.

The authors in this book give us vivid pictures of how conflict, indeed of how life, appears from the center of each person's cultural universe. The volume offers to the reader a sampling of cultural voices essential to effective practice, yet not commonly heard in the discourse of conflict resolution. The authors suggest effective models for practice, ways of balancing the work between culturally-harmonious approaches and socially-compelling needs (see, for instance, Dileepa Witharana on peacemaking in Sri Lanka, Roberto Vargas on organizational work in Latino environments, and Ted Coronel on mediating Filipinos) and for research, engaging, for instance, in activist methodologies that frankly aim at goals of social justice (examples are Anona Napoleon's use of Ho-oponopono with Hawaiian school children, Ray Leal's work with students and

staff in multicultural public schools, and Onaje Mu'id's intense examination of the horrors of rape in the Black community.) The anthology is born of our collective commitment to provide the field with an opportunity to translate theoretical openness into practical inclusion in order to meet the needs of the diverse populations conflict resolvers encounter and seek to serve.

Because conflict resolution is a relatively new profession, the creation of a literature has great importance. What do we know, what do we need to learn, how do we need to go about learning and teaching it? But, as with the conflict resolution class, the "we" in those questions tends to eclipse multiple forms of knowledge. Indeed, an active contest over knowledge exists: where does knowledge reside? What makes some knowledge of central importance, other knowledge marginal? How must knowledge be articulated to communicate across cultural lines?

Re-centering Culture, Knowledge, and Practice

Fundamental to these questions is a central understanding of power dynamics; papers by Beth Roy, Roberto Chené, Leah Wing, and Valerie Batts, among others, speak to matters of power. Respecting the perspectives of others and their ways of knowing requires critical self-reflection about our society's bias toward a myth of objectivity. Sometimes talked about in terms of center and margin, we think about a culturally-dominant mainstream that tends to overwhelm (or to appropriate in distorted forms) expressions of diverse cultural stances. In other words, as we've suggested, where the center lies depends on where one stands. When an individual lives daily and intellectual life in a cultural community rarely if ever reflected with any accuracy in mainstream images, the center quite naturally occurs where the person eats, sleeps, talks, learns, thinks, breathes.

Unfortunately, people told often enough, in the form of media images, assumptions imbedded in textbooks, standards of physical beauty and so much more, that their experience is less worthy than others' may develop a tendency to discredit their own knowledge. What do I have to contribute? I don't talk the way the "experts" speak; I can't write the way the "scholars" write. In this way, a great deal of valuable and necessary knowledge is lost to the building of a field like conflict resolution. Our effectiveness in confronting urgent problems of today's world is impaired. The barriers are not only internal, though. Peer reviewed journals, university professors, book publishers, pass judgment on work written in unfamiliar idioms, rejecting crucial ideas along with manuscripts.

What makes research credible? Where do narratives of experience pass into shareable knowledge? The editors' vision is to encourage practitioners of conflict resolution to treat their experiences as the basis for research, to move the site of knowledge-making from academia to the field of practice, from dominant culture assumptions to culturally specific practices. In the process, we have intentionally blurred lines between analysis and data, between research and personal narrative. Mary Trujillo explicitly speaks to the value of unifying subjective and objective perspectives, while the discussion with Hasshan Batts exemplifies that usefulness. We have found that it was only in the reordering of these categories that we could engage our primary theme: the contested nature of knowledge in a multicultural society in which inequality reigns.

Although this volume is not designed to resolve the question of inequality, we've begun a process of addressing relationships of primacy and marginality. Not only does each author work from the center of her or his experiential world, but we have created a volume that positions the authors as a group at the center of a "live" collaborative process. We think of the anthology as a text-based dialogue among the writers and readers. The papers we've selected do not seek to quarrel with dominant ideas, but rather to exchange information among equals.

Readers in different relationships to the material will no doubt read the papers differently. We invite and encourage those traditionally defined as "in the center" to listen in, to broaden their scope, and to join the conversation as they wish and are able. We believe readers will find insights here that promise to enrich not only their work with "others" but all conflict resolution practice at its core.

How this book is organized?

Three questions define the mission of the anthology

First, what is culture? What do we need to understand about how culture influences conflict resolution knowledge and practice? The first part of the volume explores worldviews, **putting cultural perspectives at the center of the inquiry**.

Second, what must practitioners and theorists know in order to understand and expand the learnings of the field and make these available for creating ways to address the urgent troubles that afflict the globe? This section **puts experiential knowledge at the center of research.**

Third, what values, beliefs, and expectations inform fundamental paradigms of practice? This section **puts knowledge accrued through practice at the center.**

Style and Consequences

As we editors crafted the anthology, our theoretical orientation showed up in terms of stylistic choices. We've tried to put into literary practice the principles we espouse in the volume. Three choices we made exemplify that process:

- We encouraged our authors to use the word "I" copiously. For we believe that knowledge and experience cannot be disconnected. Using the academic third person suggests impersonal objectivity; we dispute notions of unbiased scientists presenting factual information validated through processes of review by peers who share a positivist worldview.
- We use citations sparingly. There are two reasons for footnotes: to provide the reader with references and to provide the writer with legitimacy. If what the author has to say rings true to the reader, if it tests positive in the laboratory of lived experience, then that is, to us, a more useful measure of legitimacy. Therefore, we reserve citations for places where they direct the reader to a web of discourse on the subject at hand, including where available suggestions of selected further readings.
- We combine narratives recounting authors' stories of their work, including transcripts of interviews and conversations, with essays theorizing controversies within the field of conflict resolution. These "unlike" structures inform each other, drawing lines of interconnection between practice and knowledge-building.

For people new to the work of conflict resolution, we've provided context in our editors' comments. For those who are involved in the field, our editorial comments highlight and engage some of the controversies current among practitioners and scholars.

Finally, this anthology is a beginning, a work oriented toward process rather than product alone, both ours and yours to explore. We hope to stimulate more dynamic dialogue, to contribute a richer language in which to capture broader ideas and insights, and to challenge the narrowing of dimensions which, we fear, is increasingly besetting the field of conflict resolution as it struggles for professional legitimacy. The voices represented in this volume call out for more comprehensive, inclusive, and effective practice so that the peaceful resolution of conflict can become a reality for and in all communities.