

RE-CENTERING CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION PRACTICE

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PREFACE: INTRODUCING PRASI

On a chilly February morning in Chicago, in a warm and hospitable Hyde Park graystone, S.Y. Bowland, Linda James Myers, Phil Richards, Beth Roy, and Mary Trujillo gathered to create this volume. Our roads to the meeting were varied, reflecting diverse relationships with writing, conflict resolution, research, and activism.

That we met in common purpose, however, was abundantly clear. The Chicago discussion culminated five years of work by the Practitioners Research and Scholarship Institute. PRASI, as the Institute is informally known, began in 2000 as a response to troubled experiences involving issues of race and diversity in the conflict resolution world.

Conflict resolution is a field that strives for openness to varying points of view. Resolving conflicts and making decisions collaboratively depend on a willingness to hear all sides and weigh all perspectives. Yet many practitioners and students have a very different experience of the field as it applies to themselves. A sizeable number of people of color feel largely invisible in the accepted training modalities and literature, perceiving their experience and insights to lie outside the boundaries of what is defined as pertinent knowledge. Just as in many other arenas of American life, so too in the world of conflict resolution a mono-cultural dynamic has set in, the domination of a narrowly construed understanding of both practice and theory.

At PRASI's inception, what that meant in practice was an interlocking set of difficulties. More people of color were being hired to teach in university-based conflict resolution programs, in part to promote diversity among the student bodies. But they experienced the frustration of confronting a poverty of materials that related to the lives and experiences of the students. Moreover, many of the new recruits, although experienced as informal peacemakers in their home communities, were new to the structures of post-graduate degree programs. The rules and structures of the university alienated them, suggesting that they were not welcome but instead must prove themselves on someone else's terms and in ways that distorted their own wisdom and intellect.

Meanwhile, other practitioners were debating very basic assumptions: that a third-party intervener could and should be neutral; that power imbalances among disputants rooted in social structures of inequality could be righted

through collaborative process; that conflict interveners could and should mediate process not content, suggesting an absence of power relationship between “professional” and clients; that “empowerment” was a conflict intervener’s to endow. Concerned not only with what they perceived to be increasing exclusion of practitioners and scholars of color, but also with an absence of critical dialogue about questions of social justice, these practitioners and scholars sought a deepening of perspectives at the very center of the pool of shared knowledge. A rich alliance was suggested between white conflict resolvers discomfited by the assumptions of the “insiders”, and those whose consignment to the “outside” gave them a clearer view “inside” the field.

With support from a rapidly growing circle of practitioners and academics of all races, and with substantial funding by the Flora and William Hewlett Foundation, PRASI was born to address issues like these.

Process and Progress

The founders had learned through their own organizational experience one important lesson: if you want to create an institution reflecting diversity along cultural, racial, intellectual, and many other lines, you need to start out with a group of founders who are just that diverse. Slowly, over the course of many conversations and many meetings, a network grew, multiracial, enthusiastic, talented, and knowledgeable. Very quickly, a common perception was blown: “Where are the people of color in the field? Why aren’t they joining our ranks?,” many white practitioners had been asking for years. PRASI drew dozens of experienced mediators and arbitrators and educators and peacemakers, attracted not only to the ideas the Institute represented but even more to the opportunity to network with others of like experience.

Two projects formed the core work of PRASI at the beginning: to train and support practitioners, especially practitioners of color, to write about their experience and insights; and to collect literature about conflict resolution in communities of color in a volume that would be equally useable by students, researchers, and practitioners: this anthology.

Through retreats and trainings, conference presentations and networking, the work of stimulating new writing has been rich and fruitful. The anthology changed course, becoming a mixture of existing writing and new papers, inspired by the process of creating the volume itself.

PRASI continues today as a loose and vital network of practitioners, multicultural in the truest sense of that word: a place where different worldviews challenge and inform each other, giving rise to new relationships and new literature.