

**Rethinking Mediation Training: Intercultural
Considerations in Special Education**

*A workshop at CADRE's 5th National Symposium
on Dispute Resolution in Special Education
Showcasing Exemplary Practices*

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Session description

Intercultural dynamics are part of every dispute resolution process whether or not the participants are members of visible minority groups. In this session, participants will explore ways to enhance cultural fluency in training and intervention through experiential exercises and exploration of the cultural values embedded in dispute resolution processes.

Agenda

Dynamics of conflict and culture

Cultural fluency defined

Somatic explorations of cultural fluency in conflict

Designing and implementing culturally fluent dispute resolution trainings and processes

Reflections and synthesis

Dynamics of Culture and Conflict

Too often, cultural difference is seen as associated only with ethnic or racial variables. People (especially in dominant groups) think of culture as something others have, rather than dynamics that affect relationships in multidirectional ways. If we use the analogy that **culture to people is like water to fish**, we remember that culture is all around us. Cultural messages are shared by groups of people and give information about behaviors, communication, attitudes, values and ways of being in the world.

Cultural influences include: age, geographic region, ability/disability, recency of immigration, generation, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, profession or discipline, gender, religion, language, race, ethnicity and many others. We can talk about police culture, bureaucratic culture, or the culture of social workers. Using this broad definition, culture refers to a set of unwritten, unspoken norms, values and ways of seeing self and others that affect relationships. **It is clear that all of us have multicultural identities, and every conflict has cultural dynamics.**

Cultural groups have their own “common sense of conflict” that gives group members information about

- what constitutes a conflict
- whether and when to do anything about it
- what to do about it
- who should help (insider partial or outsider neutral)
- where the conflict should be addressed
- which styles of communication are appropriate and inappropriate
- what kind of process is useful and what kind of process is unacceptable
- what range of outcomes is acceptable and possible

Cultural fluency in addressing conflicts means having an awareness of our own and other’s perceptual and worldview lenses. It means assessing conflict dynamics with sensitivity to identity and meaning-making differences, and having a range of strategies and tools to address it that are centered in relationship.

Culture and Conflict: Connections

Cultures are embedded in every conflict because conflicts arise in human relationships. Cultures affect the ways we name, frame, blame, and attempt to tame conflicts. Whether a conflict exists at all is a cultural question. In an interview conducted in Canada, an elderly Chinese man indicated he had experienced no conflict at all for the previous 40 years.¹ Among the possible reasons for his denial was a cultural preference to see the world through lenses of harmony rather than conflict, as encouraged by his Confucian upbringing. Labeling some of our interactions as conflicts and analyzing them into smaller component parts is a distinctly western approach that may obscure other aspects of relationships.

Culture may play a central role in conflicts, or it may influence them subtly and gently. For any conflict that touches us where it matters - where we make meaning and hold our identities - there is always a cultural component. Intractable conflicts are not just about territorial or resource issues – they are also about history, acknowledgement, representation, and the interplay of different identities as they inform ways of living, being, and making meaning.

Culture is inextricable from conflict, though it does not cause it. When differences surface in families, organizations, or communities, cultural dynamics are always present, shaping perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. Conflicts between teenagers and parents are shaped by generational culture, and conflicts between spouses or partners are influenced by gender culture. In organizations, conflicts arising from different disciplinary cultures escalate tensions between co-workers, creating strained or inaccurate communication and stressed relationships. Culture permeates conflict – sometimes pushing with intensity, other times quietly snaking along, hardly announcing its presence until surprised people nearly stumble on it.

When the cultural groups we belong to are a large majority in our community or nation, we are less likely to be aware of the content of the messages they send us. Cultures shared by dominant groups often seem to be “natural”, “normal” – “the way things are done”. We are more likely to notice the effects of cultures that are different from our own, attending to behaviors that we label exotic or strange.

Though culture is intertwined with conflict, some approaches to conflict transformation minimize cultural issues and influences. Since culture is like an iceberg – largely submerged – it is best to be aware of it in analyses and interventions. Icebergs unacknowledged can be dangerous, and it is impossible to make choices about them if we don't know their size or place. Acknowledging culture and bringing cultural fluency to conflicts can help all kinds of people make more intentional, adaptive choices.

¹ LeBaron, Michelle and Bruce Grundison. 1993. Conflict and Culture: Research in Five Communities in British Columbia, Canada. Victoria, British Columbia: University of Victoria Institute for Dispute Resolution.

Culture and Conflict: How to Respond

Given cultures' important roles in conflicts, what should be done to keep it in mind and include it in response plans? Cultural dynamics may seem like temperamental children: complicated, elusive, and difficult to predict. Unless we develop comfort with culture as an integral part of conflict, we may find ourselves tangled in its net of complexity, limited by our own cultural lenses. Cultural fluency is a key tool for disentangling and managing multilayered, cultural conflicts.

Cultural fluency means familiarity with cultures: their natures, how they work, ways they intertwine with our relationships in times of conflict and harmony. Cultural fluency means awareness of several dimensions of culture, including

- Communication
- Ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict
- Approaches to meaning-making
- Identities and roles
- Perception
- Meaning-making processes

Conflict transformation processes work best when designed and implemented using cultural fluency. Culturally fluent conflict transformation processes welcome people with diverse worldviews. They are flexible, permeable, and responsive.

Flexible means that conflict transformation processes offer choices relating to venue, identity and role of intervenor, timing, definition of parties, and outcome. For example, when a party to a conflict wants to include extended family members in the process, a flexible intervenor finds a way to accommodate their involvement.

Permeable means that conflict transformation process facilitators and managers respond to needs of people whose assumptions and values about conflict are different than those in the dominant culture. For example, if a party places face-saving above confrontation, permeable conflict transformation processes accommodate this preference through offering private sessions or shuttle negotiations.

Responsive means that conflict transformation processes are centered in the needs of the communities they serve, and engage representatives of diverse communities in giving feedback about service effectiveness and planning new initiatives.

Levels of Conflict and Strategies for Analysis and Intervention

Levels of conflict	What causes conflict	What to do about conflict
MATERIAL/ ANALYTICAL	Scarcity of resources, competing interests over issues	Limit emotions; apply logical reasoning and problem-solving skills; separate people from problems; strive for objectivity and detachment; maximize joint gains through expanding the pie
TRANSACTIONAL	Poor communication; ineffective social structures; competitive social attitudes; power struggles	Improve communication among parties; switch from a competitive to a collaborative mode to improve relationships; address power issues; construct social systems that provide security and open communication; attend to face-saving
SYMBOLIC	Differing perceptions arising from cultural and worldview differences; identity clashes; different ways of making meaning	Create opportunities for parties to see into each other's worlds using narratives, metaphors, rituals and other symbolic tools; broaden ways of gathering and sharing information to take identity and meaning-making into account; notice and work with shifts and turning points

Ritual, Metaphor and Storytelling as Intervention Tools

At the symbolic level, conflict is not easily analyzed nor addressed. Because much of the content of the conflict at this level is out of our awareness, it is important to use tools that touch us where we make meaning. Ritual, metaphor and storytelling are three of these tools, useful for conflict analysis and as a framework for thinking about training.

Rituals are patterned activities outside everyday routine where

- ❖ Sensing and feeling take priority over thought and analysis
- ❖ Relationship is emphasized
- ❖ Transition is accomplished

Rituals arise in organizations as ways for people to connect, enjoy each others' company and transition. The transition may be through a conflict; it may relate to status or role; it may relate to phases of a project. Rituals may be formal or informal; traditional or improvised. Actions do not need to be repeated in the same way to be a ritual.

Rituals are useful in transforming conflict because they help build and reinforce trust and empathy across cultural differences. Rituals draw our attention to what we share with others, mark turning points and facilitate participation. They allow us to address conflicts while saving face. In training settings, rituals can help build group identity and address differences.

Metaphors are sensory ways of connecting one idea with another. They are rich in information, like a kind of shorthand conveying how a situation is seen, how a person sees themselves and others in the situation, and the emotionality of the situation. Metaphors are useful for conflict analysis and intervention because they help us understand different meaning systems in operation, assess the intensity of a conflict, and find a way into relationship with parties. They are useful for training because they communicate at the symbolic level about identity and meaning without threatening or challenging.

We can use metaphors by: including reference to participants' metaphors in our communications; inviting dialogue among participants about their metaphors for training; inviting participants to devise shared metaphors that encompass their understandings and give them a way to work dialogically together.

Stories are uncontroversial vehicles for situating people in context, and have the advantage of building empathy and trust, expanding understandings of motives and intentions, and breaking down the image of a person as "the other." Because a personal story is an account of the speaker's behavior in context from their perspective, it is often not received as directly challenging to others, even by those who have a different experience of the same events.

**HAMPDEN-TURNER and TROMPENAARS
BUILDING CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE ♦**

STARTING POINTS

DIMENSION	DEFINITION	INDICATIONS	IMPLICATIONS
Individualism/ Communitarianism	Degree to which the decision-making, choice center is the individual or the community/group	Equal sharing vs. rewards for initiative; attention to group needs vs. emphasis on self-reliance	Shareholder vs. stakeholder value; profitability vs. market-share; pioneer spirit vs. playing catch-up
Specificity/ Diffuseness	Degree of attention to specific vs. diffuse, patterned focus	Attention to individual efficiency and performance vs. teamwork and social relations	Report vs. rapport; the bottom line vs. goodwill; bricklayers vs. stonemasons
Sequential time/ Synchronous time	Degree to which time is seen as an arrow or a cycle	“Time is money” vs. “life is a dance”	Parallel processing vs. straight-line production; time is rigid and exact vs. time is soft and elastic; first-come, first-served vs. clustering; focus on causation vs. one element in a complex system
Universalism/ Particularism	Degree to which focus is on broad, general ideals or specific values	Innovation and vitality vs. systems that work open to all; focus on the exquisite vs. welcoming diversity	Emphasis on science vs. human relations; mass production vs. customization; formal vs. informal systems

♦ Building Cross Cultural Competence, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000