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# Creative Marginality: Exploring the Links between Conflict Resolution and Social Work

## Abstract

The concept of creative marginality refers to the process through which researchers in academic fields move away from the mainstream and toward the margins of their fields and look toward the margins of other fields that may overlap with and fill in gaps in their fields. This interaction, occurring outside of disciplinary boundaries, promotes intellectual cross-fertilization, and it is often the site of innovation. This article examines the links and interactions between the academic disciplines and practices of social work and conflict resolution. The article describes the different theoretical frames and practical approaches of both social work and conflict resolution, and discusses the ways in which these are parallel in both fields.

Theorists and practitioners in social work and conflict resolution are engaged in debate around three key concepts related to self-determination, empowerment, and professional ethics. The newer and emerging frames of both fields are situated at parallel positions on the continuum of approaches to these key concepts, in their respective professions. These frames favor elicitive rather than prescriptive approaches and increased client or party self-determination, a focus on transformation and empowerment rather than on problem-solving alone, and a stance of engagement and advocacy towards intervention, rather than neutrality and impartiality. The authors argue that increased interchange between the two fields has the potential to contribute to the development of innovative approaches to transforming social conflicts and promoting positive social change.

**Keywords:** *conflict resolution, creative marginality, identity, intellectual cross-fertilization, mediation, resource frame, social work*

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Randi Land Rothman is a clinical social worker and has worked with individuals, families and groups, particularly around issues of loss and change. She has led workshops and trainings in both social work and conflict resolution settings and as a journalist has published a variety of articles in newspapers, magazines and journals.

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# **CREATIVE MARGINALITY: EXPLORING THE LINKS BETWEEN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND SOCIAL WORK**

**Jay Rothman  
Randi Land Rothman  
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## *Abstract*

The concept of creative marginality refers to the process through which researchers in academic fields move away from the mainstream and toward the margins of their fields and look toward the margins of other fields that may overlap with and fill in gaps in their fields. This interaction, occurring outside of disciplinary boundaries, promotes intellectual cross-fertilization, and it is often the site of innovation. This article examines the links and interactions between the academic disciplines and practices of social work and conflict resolution. The article describes the different theoretical frames and practical approaches of both social work and conflict resolution, and discusses the ways in which these are parallel in both fields.

Theorists and practitioners in social work and conflict resolution are engaged in debate around three key concepts related to self-determination, empowerment, and professional ethics. The newer and emerging frames of both fields are situated at parallel positions on the continuum of approaches to these key concepts, in their respective professions. These frames favor elicitive rather than prescriptive approaches and increased client or party self-determination, a focus on transformation and empowerment rather than on problem-solving alone, and a stance of engagement and advocacy towards intervention, rather than neutrality and impartiality. The authors argue that increased interchange between the two fields has the potential to contribute to the development of innovative approaches to transforming social conflicts and promoting positive social change.

## **Introduction**

Conflict is ubiquitous. It has been a major concern of every social science discipline, from political science to psychology, from economics to communications. Conflict and its resolution has also been a central feature of many professions, including law and diplomacy, management and social work. Working with conflict is often at the core of what social workers do. In fact, social workers are increasingly practicing conflict resolution as a profession (e.g. family and community mediation) or as an integral part of their social work practice.

In turn, the relatively new discipline of conflict resolution has drawn on every social science discipline, including political science, economics, sociology,

anthropology, and psychology. Conflict resolution practitioners have adopted approaches and techniques from many professions, including education, counseling and social work.

The link between social work and conflict resolution is an unequivocal one with numerous shared theories and methods underlying the practices of both fields. Both fields place an emphasis on people's interests, needs, values and identity. Both require collaborative processes. Much of the work in both fields involves addressing issues that affect children and families, communities, organizations, and the environment. Yet both fields, perhaps too readily, have tended to appropriate the vocabularies and techniques of the other, without thoroughly grasping the assumptions and concepts underpinning them. And despite the overlap, there has been little concentrated effort to include conflict resolution theory and practice as a fundamental component of social work education. Neither have conflict resolution academics nor practitioners made a conscious effort to identify the contributions that social work has made and can make to the field of conflict resolution.

Nevertheless, there are parallel theoretical currents that have implications for the practice of both fields. One is the problem-solving approach, which is currently the basis of social work practice, particularly in the context of managed care. The problem-solving approach is also the basis of the predominant conflict management practice which is "interest-based bargaining" (Fisher and Ury, 1981).

Another is the transformative approach, the goals of which include personal change, changed relationships, and the empowerment of individuals or groups. This approach is characterized by a focus on collaborative processes and an emphasis on self-determination. The goal of transformative approaches is empowerment (Rothman, 1997 and Bush and Folger, 1994).

Still another is the nested approach, which acknowledges - and sometimes attempts to address - the multiple layers of the system in which individuals are embedded (Dugan, 1996). Theorists and practitioners in both fields are struggling to define the roles of their fields in relation to the larger structural or systemic issues that are often the source of the problems that their practices are attempting to solve. This is sometimes played out in decisions about the appropriate systemic level at which to carry out interventions.

Both fields are impacted by the contradictions and tensions between the problem solving, transformative, and structural or systemic approaches. It is in grappling with these tensions, at the cutting edges of these fields, that a partnership between them holds the most promise. In both the academic and professional arenas, there is much to be gained from cross-fertilization between social work and conflict resolution.

### **Creative Marginality**

The concept of creative marginality was developed by Dogan and Pahre (1990), who suggest that each academic field develops its own theoretical knowledge base built on an accumulation of innovations (what they term "patrimony"), which grounds the research in that field. As disciplines grow and become dense with theorists, there is an overcrowding in the academic field with many scholars studying the same patrimony

and asking the same questions. Such density is not characterized by innovation.

Density simultaneously creates a propensity for researchers to fragment into sub fields. Specialization subsequently produces gaps between sub fields. As some scholars move away from the mainstream and toward the margins of the field, they begin to look toward the margins of other fields that may overlap and fill in those gaps. This interaction outside of disciplinary boundaries provides the grounds for intellectual cross-fertilization, and it is often the site at which innovation occurs. "Not only are the margins less densely populated, providing more room to grow, but successful combinations of material from two sub fields typically allows greater scope for creativity. In fact, the greatest accumulation of incremental advances takes place at the intersection of fields" (Dogan and Pahre, 1990).

This process has occurred in most fields of inquiry from anthropology to zoology. For example, the field of developmental psychology, in attempting to fill in the gap between psychological development and biological development, has become an important field in its own right (Dogan and Pahre, 1990). The cross-fertilization of theories and practices between the fields of conflict resolution and social work promises not only the possibility of innovation at the site at which their margins overlap, but also the possibility of producing a hybrid sub field. In anticipation of this innovation, it is important to explore how conflict resolution can inform the theory and practice of social work and how social work can inform the theory and practice of conflict resolution.

### **Intervention in Conflict Resolution and Social Work: Mediation as a Crossroad**

There are numerous examples that illustrate the synthesis between social work and conflict resolution in the practices of both fields. This is most pronounced in the arena of mediation. There are many people practicing mediation today and they come from a wide range of experience and training, including lawyers, conflict resolution professionals and community volunteers. Social workers are increasingly including mediation in their "toolbox" of interventions. These include divorce and custody mediation, mediating intercultural conflicts, mediating community conflicts, crime victim-offender mediation, Equal Employment Opportunity disputes, and health care conflicts (between health care providers, patients, and insurance companies). Of these, divorce and custody mediation is perhaps the most widely practiced type of mediation by social workers.

Social workers began providing divorce mediation services in the United States in the 1960's, and within two decades were providing almost half of the mediation services in the private sector, and almost three quarters of the services in the public sector (Pearson, Ring and Milne, 1983). The divorce mediator facilitates negotiations between spouses attempting to reach a divorce settlement. Unlike the traditional divorce litigation process, a key characteristic of divorce mediation is the emphasis on ensuring that both parties' issues are voiced and acknowledged, leading to recognition and acceptance of mutual responsibility for the relationship's outcome (Haynes, 1978).

Mediation is compatible with social work practice because its goal is to help

parties solve their own problems and to empower people in conflict. Mediation builds on social work skills, such as problem analysis, communication, and systems intervention. However, mediation is not just another application of core social work skills. It draws on many other professional disciplines as well, including sociology, political science, law and organizational development (Mayer, 1995).

While conflict resolution is not psychotherapy, and mediation is not a therapeutic technique, it is a technique that may have considerable therapeutic benefit. Kelly (1983) points out that there are similarities in the goals, techniques and outcomes of psychotherapy and mediation, in the context of divorce mediation; however he insists that the two must be seen as distinct professions.

It is important to recognize that the effect of a successfully completed mediation on one or both clients can be similar to the effect hoped for in therapy. For example, the divorce mediation process is often highly therapeutic for one or both parties since it can lead to an observable reduction in the anxiety, depression, and anger that can be generated by divorce. Similarly, mediators sometimes note increased acceptance of the divorce, increased confidence in one's ability to cope, heightened self-reliance, and improved communications between divorcing spouses. However positive these changes may be, they are not usually the primary goal of mediation, but rather the effect of the process. In fact, mediation can produce a divorce settlement satisfactory to both parties without any accompanying psychological change (Kelly, 1983).

Problem-solving mediation may employ some of the same techniques as therapy but the mediator is focused on how to reach an agreement by which the parties will abide in the future. Its goal is not to examine past pain or negative patterns of interaction. "Mediation has long been distinguished from therapy by its settlement goals, task focus, and highly structured format. The psychological and emotional benefits accrued from mediation have usually been considered secondary goals or by-products of a cooperative process" (Gold, 1997).

The role of the problem-solving mediator is more directive than that of the therapist; the mediator may structure the process, suggest options, educate, organize information and assist the parties to develop proposals. Assessment is limited since mediation does not generally probe deeply into past history. Intervention may include social work techniques as well as aspects of law, conflict management, and negotiation and bargaining strategies and tactics (Kruk, 1997).

However, as both conflict resolution and social work move away from interest-based problem-solving goals, and towards needs- and identity-based empowerment and transformative goals, their borders become increasingly blurred. Current mediation practice can be seen as falling along a continuum from "structured to therapeutic, neutralist to interventionist, directive to nondirective" (Kruk, 1997, p. 11) depending on the mediator, the parties, and the nature of the conflict. Some conflicts, such as those involving child custody, require more intervention on the part of the mediator.

If the goal of mediation is to facilitate the process of divorce in a way that can ensure continued and effective nurturing and sustenance of a child, then mediation must be integrated into a wider spectrum of educational, psychological, legal, and community services for the divorcing family. As Wallerstein (1986) writes, "Family

mediation has outgrown its origins and emerged as a social intervention that takes us to a new threshold in conflict resolution. A dignified and dignifying method of decision making, it affirms that the process by which people arrive at a decision is related to the efficacy of that decision. This is perhaps the single most revolutionary idea regarding mediation that we must grasp".

Social work and human service scholars have promoted several therapeutic approaches to mediation. Irving and Benjamin (1987) present a four-stage therapeutic family mediation approach, as an alternative to structured negotiation in family mediation. Kruk's (1997) therapeutic-interventionist approach is suggested for facilitating parenting plans after a divorce. In this approach, the mediator takes on an advocacy role for the children's needs. Johnston and Campbell's (1988) tri-level model of high conflict mediation proposes that mediation and counseling may sometimes be provided by the same professional. In these models, "the primary focus of mediation is the underlying emotional issues and relational processes blocking agreement, and the goal of mediation is not only settlement of the dispute, but restructured relationships, enhanced communication and problem-solving skills, and increased cooperation or at least reduction of conflict between and among the parties" (Kruk, 1997). These forms of mediation, which are informed by a social work/human services perspective, incorporate elements of therapy into mediation practice.

As conflict resolution practitioners increasingly utilize techniques that expand the borders of their field beyond mediation, and as social workers increasingly employ practices that expand the borders of their field beyond psychotherapy, the boundaries between the two professions become even more blurred. For example, a relatively recent innovation in which both conflict professionals and social workers are involved is the victim-offender reconciliation program (VORP), which is based on the concept of restorative justice (Severson and Bankston, 1995). The aim of a VORP is to provide an alternative to the judicial process that will enable a crime victim and an offender to work together towards a settlement that promotes reconciliation between them (Umbreit, 1993). The offender (generally having been convicted of burglary or theft) is normally referred to a mediator by the court. The mediator arranges a joint meeting between the victim and the offender, at which the victim communicates their feelings about the crime and their sense of victimization. The offender is given the opportunity to explain the circumstances that led to the committing of the crime. Both parties then work together to arrive at a mutually acceptable settlement, which could be monetary compensation, community service, or some other form of restitution (Umbreit, 1993). In a VORP, social workers and conflict resolution practitioners, may be involved not only as mediators, but also as trainers, organizers and program developers (Umbreit, 1993).

It is important to note that although mediation is perhaps the most widely known and practiced conflict resolution intervention, new approaches are being developed. These approaches include: focusing on conflict prevention, providing procedural, substantive, or decision making assistance to parties, peacebuilding and reconciliation, and dispute system design (Mayer, 2000). These new approaches aim to address the limitations of mediation and continue to contribute to the growth of the field of conflict resolution.

### **From the Center to the Margins of Conflict Resolution: Resources, Interests, Identities, and Structures**

Conflict theory can be organized in terms of "frames," signifying that each of these perspectives provides a lens to the world of conflict. Frames set phenomena within a conceptual and cognitive context that delineates their components and imposes upon them a particular organization and meaning (Bateson, 1972; Schon and Rein, 1994). Frames focus the attention of both theorists and practitioners on particular aspects of the conflict situation, shape the definition of the problem, and guide conflict intervention (Bolman and Deal, 1984; Friedman and Lipshitz, 1994). Frames may also be limiting and lead to selective perception (Dearborn and Simon, 1958). For the purpose of this paper, the dominant and emerging (and still somewhat peripheral) frames in the field of conflict resolution, will be categorized into four major "frames", which will be referred to as the resource frame, the interests frame, the identity frame, and the structural frame.

#### **The resource frame**

The "resource" frame views conflict as "a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals" (Coser, 1967). This definition reflects the current predominant Western approach to conflict (Hocker and Wilmot, 1995). From the perspective of the resource frame, human existence is seen as a competitive process in which conflict may be contained or ameliorated but never eliminated.

According to the resource frame, conflict is the natural outcome of competition among individuals and groups over material goods, economic resources, and political power. The natural tendency towards aggression must be contained by the creation of coercive or legal frameworks, and by a "social contract" which can forge a functioning society based on the alignment of individual and group interests. The resource frame draws on the perspective of sociologists such as Parsons (1960), who regard "equilibrium" or stability as an indication of a healthy society.

Within the resource frame, the alternatives to violence for settling conflicts are either mechanisms for social control or bargaining and negotiation processes. The resource frame focuses on each side gaining control of the bargaining or negotiation situation in order to "maximize" its desired outcome. Compromise is viewed as an acceptable outcome when total domination is viewed as unnecessary or impossible to win or to sustain. From the perspective of the resource frame, reaching an agreement in which resources have been redistributed to the satisfaction of all sides means that the conflict has been resolved.

A criticism of the resource frame is that it leads to interventions that emphasize short-term, material solutions that leave the underlying causes of the conflict untouched. As a result, intractable conflicts, whose sources are structural, tend to recur with added intensity. Each time a conflict recurs it may become increasingly entrenched and the cost of its resolution may become higher and higher. Moreover, to



the extent that the underlying causes remain unaddressed, the resource based framing may leave deeper problems ignored until they explode as a full-blown crisis.

### **The interests frame**

To date, an “interests” frame of conflict has dominated the field of conflict management. It was popularized by Fisher and Ury, in their book *Getting to Yes* (1981), and by others in the fields of international diplomacy, law, environmental mediation, and community relations (Carrbonneau, 1989; Goldberg, Green and Sander, 1985; Raifa, 1982 Rubin and Brown, 1975; Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987). These approaches reject the view of conflict as a zero-sum competition over scarce resources and power, even though conflicts may appear to hinge upon incompatible demands for power, territory or material resources.

Fisher and Ury (1981) suggest that such demands, or bargaining positions, are simply concrete expressions of underlying interests, which they define as "needs, desires, concerns, and fears". The interests approach maintains that parties to a conflict often become fixated on their bargaining positions and lose sight of their genuine interests. Rather than haggling over ways to divide limited resources, parties explore ways in which their interests can be linked through "integrative" bargaining rather than domination or compromise (Follett, 1942).

The interests frame, with its more optimistic view of conflict, is strongly reflected in intervention theories that focus on "managing" conflict (Blake, Shepard, and Mouton, 1964; Likert and Likert, 1976; Thomas, 1976; Tjosvold, 1991; Walton, 1987; Walton and McKersie, 1966). Conflict management implies that certain levels of conflict are necessary and functional. Unlike the resource frame, which sees conflict intervention as primarily a negotiation process, conflict management reflects the interests frame's emphasis on problem solving and developing good relationships (Rahim, 1986; Thomas, 1976; Walton, 1987). Conflict management shares the resource frame's emphasis on bargaining strategies and tactics, but with a strong emphasis on replacing competitive strategies with cooperative or collaborative ones and on producing "win/win" outcomes (Axelrod, 1984; Deutsch, 1973, 1994; Walton, 1987).

Smith (1987) pointed out that some interventionists associated with the interests frame see themselves as agents of social change. However, by focusing primarily on agreements and fostering improved working relationships, they may actually reinforce the status quo of the system even though they espouse system change. Because of its emphasis on controlling conflict and promoting collaborative strategies, conflict management lends itself to "single loop learning," which focuses on changing individual and group behavior while leaving the underlying goals, values and norms unchanged. As a result, the interests frame may be of limited help, or even be counterproductive, in producing "double-loop learning," which involves critical inquiry into, and changes in, underlying goals, values, and norms (Argyris and Schon, 1996). As with the resource frame, the interests frame's focus on solutions may leave the sources of the conflict undiscussed and undiscussible. Even when it appears to be successful, conflict management can lead to an illusion of resolution. If the underlying problems are not fully addressed, the deeper conflicts will continue to resurface again

and again (around different issues, perhaps) leading to greater distrust, cynicism, and hopelessness.

### **The identity frame**

The "identity" frame of conflict is a newer frame that has been incorporated into the field of conflict resolution. This frame also sees conflict as stemming from needs, desires, concerns, and fears. However, it suggests that intractable conflicts are really about the articulation and confrontation of individual and collective identities (Rothman, 1997). These conflicts may be expressed and negotiated in terms of resources or interests, but they really involve people's individual and collective goals, sense of meaning, and definitions of self. According to the identity frame, conflicts are rooted in threats to or frustration of fundamental human needs, such as those for dignity, recognition, safety, control, purpose, and efficacy (Burton, 1990 and Azar, 1990).

The identity frame differs from the other two frames by rejecting the notion that conflicts are problems to be resolved or even managed. While acknowledging the destructive potential of conflict, this frame maintains that conflict offers opportunities for growth, adaptation, and learning (Bush and Folger, 1994; Lederach, 1995; Rupesinghe, 1995). This approach, also known as the "interactive problem-solving approach," views conflict as a result of threatened or frustrated needs which must be surfaced, fully analyzed and addressed, before any kind of bargaining or negotiation can succeed (Azar, 1990; Burton, 1990; Kelman, 1982; Fisher, 1996; Rothman, 1992).

Gurevitch (1989) suggests that true dialogue and learning occurs when disputants learn how to "not understand" each other instead of continually imposing their own mental models on the other. This studied unknowing involves fundamentally questioning the way in which individuals and groups have constructed the reality which they share (akin to the process of double loop learning). On the one hand, it can lead to mutually defined perceptions of reality. On the other hand, it can increase the possibility that both sides gain deeper insight about themselves. From this perspective, the desired outcome of conflict is not just resolution, but also growth, moral development, and fundamental changes in perception.

The identity frame focuses on the process of engaging conflict rather than simply reaching a particular settlement. Conflict engagement means creating "reflexive dialogue" in which parties speak about their needs and interests in the presence of their adversaries (Rothman, 1997). It also aims explicitly at change both within individual parties and between parties. Having first expressed themselves and heard each other in this way, parties are encouraged to collaborate in setting new goals and restructuring their relationship on the basis of changes in, and more positive definitions of, themselves.

Rather than focusing on resolving conflicting interests, the identity-frame provides a way of thinking about conflict as an opportunity for double-loop learning, or inquiry into and clarification of deeper issues involving fundamental goals, values, needs, standards, and assumptions (Argyris and Schon, 1996). Unlike the resource or interests

frames of conflict, the identity frame does not focus on bargaining or negotiation as a means of intervening in or resolving conflict. From the perspective of the identity frame, the goal of intervention is not just reaching agreements or resolution. Rather it entails engaging conflict as an opportunity for challenging the status quo. From the identity frame perspective, conflict promotes what Argyris and Schon (1978) have called "good dialectic." Agreements emerge not through changing strategies from competition to cooperation but as the result of inquiry and fundamental changes in thinking. By asking parties in a conflict to consider the meaning behind their needs and interests, the identity frame offers an approach to conflict and conflict engagement that can be empowering and transformative.

### **The structural frame**

An emerging frame in the field of conflict resolution is the structural frame. This frame has its roots in the work of Johan Galtung (1969) and the field of peace studies. Galtung (1969) developed the concept of "structural violence" as the situation of political, economic, and social injustice in which gross inequities exist between different groups' decision-making power over the distribution of resources (Galtung, 1969).

Maire Dugan (1996), another peace researcher, developed the "nested theory" to delineate how a given interpersonal, familial, or organizational conflict is symptomatic of over-arching societal systems and structures. On the one hand, traditional conflict resolution practice addresses an immediate crisis, and may even help to repair or renew the relationship between conflicting parties; however, it does not redress the inequalities of the system that is at the root of the conflict. On the other hand, peace research focuses on the structural and systemic level, but does not resolve the conflict at hand, or mend the relationship. Dugan suggests an intermediate level, which she calls the sub-system, as the arena in which practitioners can simultaneously address the conflict at hand, the relationship, and the larger system.

Conflict theorists employing the structural frame propose that changes in both relationships and structures or systems are necessary for genuine conflict transformation to occur. Jeong (1999) writes, "Efforts to resolve conflict need to be assessed in terms of an outcome as well as a process. Subsequently, conflict resolution has to be geared toward finding solutions to the structural causes of problems that are responsible for contentious relationships.... Negotiation for peaceful relationships would not be effective without confronting the structural origins of problems".

Richard Rubenstein (1999) points out that interveners are regularly successful in their efforts to assist parties in restructuring systems or patterned relationships in organizations and families. "To the extent that the family functions as an independent social unit, this task may be accomplished without great difficulty by skillful third parties" (Rubenstein, 1999). But families, organizations, schools, and other social units, are not independent units. Rubenstein (1999) continues, "....their embeddedness in modern social structures makes it increasingly difficult for them to play traditional roles as institutional alternatives to the macro-system. As a result, one increasingly finds family conflicts linked with broader structural conflicts. Their termination may

therefore be dependent upon conflict resolution at a more encompassing and problematical level".

Traditional conflict resolution practice, because it brings the parties to settlement without addressing the underlying causes of the conflict, may result in temporary peace. However, the failure to restructure in significant and fundamental ways, almost guarantees that conflict will recur (Rubenstein, 1999).

### **From the Center to the Margins of Social Work: Psychotherapies, Strengths and Ecosystems**

Social work theories, too, can be organized in terms of "frames," or perspectives that provide a lens to social problems. The social work profession, already a century old, is clearly much older than the profession of conflict resolution. Nevertheless, there is considerable overlap between many of the assumptions, concepts and approaches of the newest and emerging approaches of conflict resolution and social work.

#### **The psychotherapy frame**

Social work is rooted in the nineteenth-century concept of casework, which focused on a diagnosis and treatment model of social work practice (James, 1987). For the past seventy years, social work has been dominated by the assumption that individualized psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and humanistic psychology are appropriate means for dealing with social problems (Specht, 1994). "We have these perceptions of social treatments because, as Americans, our belief in the individual's capacity for change is strong, and our faith in the power of the group and the community is weak, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding." (Specht, 1994.)

In this frame, social work is primarily a problem-solving approach, as both the individual and society strive for self-fulfillment (Compton and Galaway, 1994). What distinguishes different theories and practices of social work often depends on the answer to the question: With whom does responsibility for change rest? Is it the social worker or the client? James (1987) suggests that there is a continuum along which the different theories and practices of social work answer that question.

The psychosocial approach to casework (Woods and Hollis, 1990) emphasizes the importance of assessment and diagnosis and the social worker's efforts to determine the client's needs. Perlman's (1970) problem-solving model places more emphasis on the client's ownership of the problem, but still suggests "the problem-to-be-worked may become that of helping the client move from his interpretation of the problem to that of the caseworker". Ruth Smalley's functional approach (1970) works from a psychology of growth, with the center of change in the client.

Crisis intervention assumes that the client's normal problem-solving mechanisms may not be functioning effectively and that the social worker may have to take an active role in owning and defining the client's problem. Behavior modification, based on learning theory, allows the client to retain ownership of the problem, while the social worker takes on the role of expert. Task-centered casework, which is particularly

applicable for short-term treatment, encourages social workers to assist clients in achieving specific and limited goals of their choice. The social worker assists the client to list and rank order problems and to develop means to work on them, at which point, the social worker's role is to monitor the client's progress (James, 1987).

More recently, feminist-informed, culturally sensitive, and humanistic approaches to social work back away from the social worker as expert and focus on client-directed definitions of problems. On the margins of social work today are even more subjective approaches, such as narrative, constructivist, and post-modern theories, which posit that reality is not objectively determined, but is subjectively constructed and contextualized. These theories refocus the emphasis of social work practice on process rather than outcome, with the stress on shaping inquiry into the clients' definitions of their problems, rather than on diagnosis. Ironically, this trend is emerging as managed health care demands an increasing focus on problem solving with measurable outcomes.

### **The strengths frame**

The strengths frame has developed in part as a response to the pathology frame. "Some of the impetus for the development of a strengths/resilience-based practice comes from our society's unabashed fascination with pathology, problems, moral and interpersonal aberrations, violence, and victimization. Add to that the unstinting effort to medicalize and pathologize almost every human behavior pattern, habit, and trait, and you have a heady mix of diagnoses, labels, and identities at the ready - all advertising our abnormalities, disorders, weaknesses, fallibilities, and victimization." (Saleebey, 1999.)

The strengths frame suggests a more balanced view of the power of individuals to overcome problems and produce change. This frame is characterized by "words such as empowerment, membership, competence, potential, responsibility, growth, assets, and visions" (Saleebey, 1999), which contrast with the vocabulary of the medical and psychotherapeutic approaches.

The role of the intervener includes facilitating clients to recognize and build upon their assets, strengths, and resources in their environment, to recognize their options and alternatives, and to design strategies that support and strengthen ethnic backgrounds. Intervener roles also include educating clients and assisting them to increase their own skills, encouraging clients to believe in their ability to change, and encouraging clients to assume an optimistic perspective about life's possibilities (Saleebey, 1999).

Problems, viewed by theorists and practitioners operating from the strengths frame, are opportunities for growth and change. Individuals are viewed as having unlimited capabilities for growth and change, and environments are viewed as being full of assets and resources. Proponents of the strengths frame have criticized the problem-solving approach in social work because the concentration on problems moves the focus away from client strengths. Compton and Galaway counter that, "While problems in the person-situation interaction are the basis for the initial engagement between client and worker, the ensuing formulation and implementation of solutions calls upon client strengths, strengths in the environment, and worker strengths."

(Saleebey, 1999.)

### **The ecosystem frame**

The ecosystem frame emphasizes the relationships or interactions between individuals and their social environments. It assumes that these interactions are reciprocal, and that individuals and environments are continually shaping each other (Germain and Gitterman, 1980). This dual emphasis on the individual and the environment is an important characteristic of this social work frame and distinguishes it from the psychotherapy frame and the psychotherapeutic professions.

The ecosystem frame also attempts to counter the disease or pathology orientation of the psychotherapeutic approaches to social work. Rather, this frame focuses on the role performance of individuals and the environmental supports that are available to them. "According to this approach, individuals experience problems when there is a poor fit between their needs and wants, and the resources made available by their environment - in particular, the community" (Compton and Galaway, 1999).

Because people and their environments are treated as a single concept, the ecosystem frame requires that interventions be addressed together, and that approaches to practice integrate the treatment and reform traditions of social work. Social work interventions occur at the interface between the individual and the environment, or at the problems generated by the "person-in-situation" interaction. Practice entails three objectives: facilitating interaction between individuals and their social environment, assisting individuals to increase their problem-solving skills and their competence, and influencing social and environmental policy (Compton and Galaway, 1999).

This frame's answer to a long-standing question within the social work profession about whether to focus on individual change or environmental change is that the profession should focus not on one or the other, but on the interaction between the individual and the environment. Consequently, the practice of social workers employing this approach integrates both clinical and social interventions. Because interactions between individuals and their environments are contextual, social workers must have skills to promote both individual and/or social change depending on the circumstances.

Another long-standing question within the field of social work relates to whether the profession should focus on rehabilitation or whether it should focus on prevention. Again, the ecosystems frame suggests an answer. "Prevention is seen as requiring social change, while rehabilitation is perceived as helping individuals to cope with immediate situations. In reality, all social work is both preventive and rehabilitative." (Compton and Galaway, 1999.)

### **Overlapping Concepts in Conflict Resolution and Social Work**

Conflict resolution and social work are engaged in similar controversies related to three concepts that the two fields hold in common: self-determination, empowerment, and professional ethics. Concepts, according to Dogan and Pahre (1990), are developed and given a specific meaning by a discipline, and play an important role in bridging

between disciplines. "Because scholars are socialized into a specific discipline, most of us labor under various kinds of conceptual blinders, which vary from one discipline to the next. By putting on the conceptual blinders of another discipline in order to examine one's own, or by looking at a discipline from outside, without these blinders, one has a greater opportunity to innovate." (Dogan and Pahre, 1990.)

Each of these concepts encompasses a continuum of approaches to intervention: prescriptive versus elicitive intervention, problem solving versus transformation goals, and third party neutrality/impartiality versus advocacy of intervener roles. "Not only are the theory and skill sets of mediation [and conflict resolution more generally] and generalist social work practice highly compatible, but each embraces a set of core values to which practitioners are expected to adhere, including client self-determination, empowerment, and professional competence." (Kruk, 1997.)

### **Self-determination: Prescriptive versus Elicitive Intervention**

Mayer (1995) suggests a continuum of intervener and client participation in the resolution of conflict and highlights four points along that continuum: unassisted procedures, nonbinding assistance, binding assistance and designing a dispute system. The unassisted procedures can include negotiation, conciliation, rapport building, information exchange, and collaborative problem solving and decision making. Social workers can act as coaches or teachers for clients who may be conducting their own negotiations; and in non-binding assistance procedures, social workers can act as intermediaries. Generally, social workers do not act as formal arbitrators; however, in the case of child custody evaluation, social workers' decisions may be authorized as binding by the court. The most common type of conflict resolution techniques used by social workers, and increasingly conflict resolution professionals working in the newer identity-frames, are the unassisted, facilitative, or non-binding procedures.

The debate between prescriptive versus elicitive intervention centers around the degree of authority exercised by the intervener. The more traditional frames and approaches of both fields assume a more prescriptive intervener role. In these approaches, the social worker or conflict resolution practitioner is the "expert" and is likely to prescribe or have substantial influence over the direction of the intervention and the parameters of possible solutions to the problems.

The newer approaches of both social work and conflict resolution emphasize increased client self-determination. Both seek to foster maximum client control over intervention processes and ownership of the problems. The approaches of the newer frames are more elicitive and demand the active participation of the clients in defining problems and developing alternative solutions. The role of the intervener is that of facilitator or guide, who works collaboratively with clients through these processes.

The field of conflict resolution practice incorporates an ever-growing number of applied practices, including mediation, facilitation, and arbitration. Mediation, however, is the best known and most widely practiced. There are a variety of mediation practitioners, including peer mediators in schools, volunteer mediators in community centers, court-appointed mediators and divorce and family mediators. One characteristic that differentiates types of mediation is the degree of the parties' decision

making power involved at each step of the process, beginning with whether participation by the parties is voluntary or involuntary.

A mediator who views conflict and conflict resolution through the identity frame, and who views the goals of mediation as transformation, will generally be more likely to promote the parties' self-determination in defining the problem and proposing solutions. These mediators generally employ the same elicitive techniques that social workers do, including attending and focusing, questioning, reframing, partializing, summarizing, and reflecting (Kruk, 1997). James (1987) outlines other skills that are important in mediation: identifying and defining issues, encouraging parties to share their perceptions of these issues, exploring options available to the parties, managing conflict between the parties, and helping them negotiate towards their own solutions. "Such processes and skills underline the emphasis upon client control of the proceedings and the outcome, and their continued 'ownership' of the conflict." (James, 1987.).

### **Empowerment: Problem-Solving versus Transformation**

Power can be viewed as oppressive and destructive, when viewed as the ability of one person to influence the decisions and behaviors of another. Yet power can also be seen as positive, for example, as in the ability to get things done (Yanoov, 1996).

The problem social workers must face in conflict resolution situations is how to promote the constructive application of power and how to ensure that disempowered parties gain access to available legitimate sources of power. It is not so much that a balance of power must be achieved, because such a balance is an elusive goal that an intervener usually cannot attain. Instead, it is important that the parties to a conflict be helped to obtain access to information, advocates, resources, and support systems, so they can be effective in mobilizing and bringing to bear the legitimate sources of power that are available to them (Mayer, 1995).

"At the community level, many of the social problems which concern community workers can be analyzed as the product of actual imbalances of power" (Yanoov, 1996). Viewed in these terms it is not difficult to understand why many community conflicts, in which problem-solving interventions alone are employed, are recurring. For example, if conflicts between communities are framed as legal problems, then solutions will be sought through law enforcement efforts. Unless a transformation in people's attitudes and behaviors and relationships occurs, the underlying causes of the conflict may persist or worsen. However, viewing the conflict through the identity frame to identify underlying causes, and utilizing transformative intervention approaches, may produce empowerment and changes in the balance of power. In such a situation, conflict can be embraced as an opportunity for power redistribution in the community.

For example, gender-based power imbalances are the driving force behind a feminist approach to conflict resolution. The feminist-informed goal of mediation might be twofold: both a fair and equitable settlement of the dispute and empowerment of the disadvantaged party (usually the woman). This approach to mediation is highly interventionist, since it views mediator neutrality as dangerous to the disadvantaged



party. The mediator will likely intervene in both process and outcome to assure the empowerment of the disadvantaged party (Kruk, 1997).

A central controversy in the field of conflict resolution, between problem-solving and transformative approaches, revolves around the issue of empowerment. Bush and Folger (1994) suggest that empowerment, rather than problem-solving, should be the goal of mediation. "At the simplest level, problem-solving mediation defines the objective as improving the parties' situation from what it was before. The transformative approach instead defines the objective as improving the parties themselves from what they were before....transformative mediation is successful when the parties experience growth in both dimensions of moral development....developing both the capacity for strength of self and the capacity for relating to others. These are the objectives of empowerment and recognition" (Bush and Folger, 1994.)

### **Professional Ethics: Third Party Neutrality/Impartiality versus Advocacy/Engagement**

Social workers and conflict resolution practitioners bring to their professions specific skills and competencies, many of which are parallel. Communication skills and problem-solving skills are among them. Neutrality can be considered a professional skill, but its value is being questioned increasingly in both fields.

A principal debate in the field of conflict resolution concerns whether or not the intervener should remain neutral and impartial or engage in the conflict resolution process. In traditional resource-based and interest-based bargaining, the intervener is likely to adopt a stance of neutrality and impartiality. However identity-based interveners are more likely to adopt a stance of engagement. Increasingly, the concepts of neutrality and impartiality have come to be considered by proponents of transformative approaches as unrealistic, if not impossible, and as undesirable, if not dangerous (Bush and Folger, 1994).

This line of thinking posits that no practitioner can be neutral or impartial, because all interveners bring their own assumptions, beliefs, values, and expectations, that consciously or unconsciously, frame the very questions that they ask. The intervention, through the interaction between the intervener and the conflicting parties, creates a particular reality that is based on their combined beliefs and preconceived notions about conflict and conflict resolution. Thus the intervention itself, contributes to shaping the conflict and its outcome. "There is no such thing as the "parties' conflict" when third parties are involved. Conflicts are inevitably changed as they are processed, and mediators are an inevitable part of that change." (Bush and Folger, 1994.)

One way to frame the concepts of neutrality and impartiality may be as "disciplined bias," in which the intervener becomes self-conscious about his/her own beliefs and expectations and engages in self-conscious practice (Soros, 1987). Another way to frame these concepts may be as "reflection in action", developed by Donald Schon in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983). Schon suggests that practitioners may improve their practice by focusing on how their roles and actions might influence the course of events.

A step beyond reflection, which concentrates on the role of the practitioner, is

reflexivity (Rothman, 1997), which focuses on the complex interplay between practitioner, client and context. Reflexivity suggests a process by which instinctive and unexamined reactions to external stimulus are delayed and analyzed prior to responding (Steier, 1991). This process of slowing down and analyzing the values and priorities inherent in the interaction process, while it is happening, is an interactive process which constantly considers self, other, and context, and encourages parties in conflict to examine their own underlying assumptions and priorities in their interactions. This is important, not only to the parties in conflict, but to the intervener as well.

Peile (1993) suggests ways in which social workers might avoid deterministic outcomes and promote creativity. He encourages social workers to view their own and clients' behavior as creative, and to encourage clients to view themselves in a creative relationship with their environment. The client and the social worker should relate to each other in ways that recognize each other's creative potential. The social worker should explicitly model this process by working through new ideas out loud, and by using different methods of seeking solutions, both verbal and nonverbal. He further suggests that social workers avoid rushing, and allow time for handling frustration and tension. The social worker may join with the client in collaborative reflection, and affirm and strengthen the creative initiative shown by the client, including action, reflection and experimentation (Peile, 1993).

The ethics of professional practice necessitate that social workers be keenly aware of their values and how they convey them through professional language and behavior. Manning (1997) suggests that social workers need to be aware of ethical issues, determine what is morally necessary, and transform their moral beliefs and values into action. "Social workers who have the 'courage to be as oneself' and to engage in the public debate about contemporary social transformations, integrate social work values into the public dialogue, and ultimately shape culture. Moral citizenship - awareness, thinking, feeling, and action - provides a framework for this transformational practice." (Manning, 1997.)

### **Conclusion**

There are clearly many shared theoretical and applied approaches between the fields of social work and conflict resolution, and much to be gained from a sustained dialogue between both theorists and practitioners in the two fields. Such a dialogue has the potential to significantly enhance the practice of both professions, especially in relation to those practices, such as mediation and psychotherapy, in which the borders between the two are blurred.

Practitioners in social work and conflict resolution are engaged in debate around three key concepts related to self-determination, empowerment, and professional ethics. The newer and emerging frames of both fields are situated at parallel positions on the continuum of approaches to these key concepts, in their respective professions. These frames favor elicitive rather than prescriptive approaches and increased client self-determination, a focus on transformation and empowerment rather than on problem-solving alone, and a stance of engagement and advocacy towards intervention, rather than neutrality and impartiality.

The issues at the margins of each discipline require serious intellectual consideration, particularly in terms of their implications for practice. For example, the debates in the field of social work, relating to individual change versus environmental change, and prevention versus rehabilitation, mirror similar debates in the field of conflict resolution. Increased interchange between the two fields has the potential to contribute to the development of innovative approaches to transforming social conflicts and promoting positive social change. Such innovation is to be found in the intersection of the margins of the two fields, especially in the emerging structural frame of conflict resolution and the ecosystems frame of social work.

The newer and emerging frames of both fields are concerned with the problems and conflicts that result from the structures and systems in which they occur. At the margins of both, a new goal is increasingly becoming explicit, which is to find ways to simultaneously address the immediate problems or conflicts and change those structures and systems. Intellectual collaboration at these margins can lead to enhanced exploration of how these fields can extend the empowerment of individuals and groups, and the transformation of relationships, to the transformation of the over-arching systems and structures in which those individuals and groups are embedded. This, clearly, would be a major contribution to the social sciences.

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