Editor's Reflections: Peacemaking among Helping Parties

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Abstract

Excerpt

I would like to take this opportunity to initiate a dialogue over some issues of conflict management among ourselves as third parties or helping professionals. The challenges of managing interpersonal conflicts or performing internal peacemaking are as real and relevant as the challenges of our professional undertaking in handling "outside" disputes. While recognizing there are no ready formulae to address these challenges, I invite you to join in the open-minded dialogues to examine expectations and premises often assumed among helping professionals in the fields.

Keywords: *conflict management, conflict resolution, helping professionals, peacemaking, third parties*

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EDITOR'S REFLECTIONS: PEACEMAKING AMONG HELPING PARTIES

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I would like to take this opportunity to initiate a dialogue over some issues of conflict management among ourselves as third parties or helping professionals. The challenges of managing interpersonal conflicts or performing internal peacemaking are as real and relevant as the challenges of our professional undertaking in handling "outside" disputes. While recognizing there are no ready formulae to address these challenges, I invite you to join in the open-minded dialogues to examine expectations and premises often assumed among helping professionals in the fields.

Bowling and Hoffman (2000) have made a keen observation that "as mediators… when we are feeling at peace with ourselves and the world around us, we are better able to bring peace into the room." Since conflicts are complex and ubiquitous, it takes a whole field of conflict resolution with generations of practitioners and researchers working together to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. We, as groups of mediators, facilitators, and peacemakers, need to search for internal harmony and peace among ourselves in order to work well with one another in tackling daunting human problems and social issues.

There are conflicts and struggles that are constructive and instrumental to introduce helpful changes, as we know. There is really no exception to this within the conflict resolution fields where various healthy debates, professional contests, and skill-enhancing competitions do exist. What has become puzzling is the seemingly widespread difficulty of addressing the disharmonies and conflicts within the fields, which we as helping parties seem to handle more effectively outside the fields.

In discussing issues of conflict resolution in organizations of goodwill, Kriesberg (1994) recognizes that within such organizations conflicts are often not accepted as inevitable. Members often feel that since they are of such goodwill, they will not "fight" with one another (Kriesberg, 1994). This situation may lead to conflict avoidance or problem denial in such goodwill organizations as not-for-profit conflict resolution services, volunteer-based reconciliation programs, dedicated social justice groups, and devoted peace research associations. We know well the consequences of avoidance or denial in workplaces and real life situations.

Second, Kriesberg (1994) notes that members often feel safe in working with people with whom they share ideals of peace, harmony, and equity. This higher expectation may result in righteous indignation when colleagues do or say things they regard as hurtful. Third, he observes that some members feel that they are working so hard and are so devoted to a good cause, they have little patience for those who are not helping them in their passionate efforts (Kriesberg, 1994).

Lastly, members of such organizations may often react strongly to any actual or perceived authoritarian tendencies. In light of their promoting alternative, peaceful, equalitarian approaches in a larger social context (Kriesberg, 1994), they can hardly accept anything seemingly arbitrary.

As colleagues working in the field, we have probably been involved in these types of challenges in one way or another. I realize that our experience as peacemakers may not be so different from those of other helping professions. Actually we may not differ that much at all from the rest of society. For example, in a significant number of human service and welfare agencies, helpers and providers who are supposed to serve and assist the disadvantaged, sometimes mistreat or alienate them instead.

The distance between the individuals' expertise and their respective practicing realities, including their intentions and consequences, can be vast from time to time. For example, some medical doctors often have poor health routines or physical exercise records for themselves, or as the saying goes "attorneys who represent themselves have a fool for a client."

Smoker (1996) shared with his students some interesting findings from the annual conferences he attended, where some professors of communications programs made incommunicative presentations on the communication subjects. In China, it was reported in the 1980s that a large number of model teachers often had "problem" children without realizing the need (or perhaps without capability) to use their professional skills to communicate with their own kids at home. Marriage therapists seem to divorce frequently in droves, and business professors often have bankrupted businesses.

There are influential factors and constraints such as stressful environments in which third parties often work, divergent commitments, market economy influences, third party's own livelihood, and need for enlightened self-reflection. While acknowledging that we as helpers may also need help, let's explore creative approaches to addressing the perplexing challenges of mediating the mediators, facilitating the facilitators, keeping peace among peacemakers, and solving our own problems in a walking-the-talk fashion.

Since the decade of 1990s, I have heard lots of stories and experienced some fascinating episodes in person. I would like to share with readers some reflections on the prevalent phenomena of internal strife in the fields of peacemaking and conflict resolution, to invite more explorations and dialogs:

Reflection of Fatigue

Conflict resolvers and peacemakers often work in a demanding, stressful environment such as divorce mediation room, public policy facilitation forum, labor-management bargaining session, or international negotiation table. We give so much to others—primary parties or disputants that we may not rejuvenate ourselves or regroup sufficiently. As helping professionals we definitely need to be able to take care of ourselves, instead of being burned out.

Reflection of Self-Escape

This is another major story! Knowing oneself well is often difficult in general. Yet, mediators, facilitators, or peacemakers almost have to be self-aware in order to be effective and proactive in problem solving work. However, some of us as practitioners or researchers came to the fields, as a way to avoid dealing with our own issues, issues of the same kind that the profession addresses. It may make us feel better when we are busily helping others with alleviating the same kind of headaches that we avoid addressing ourselves.

Reflection of Common Sense

Conflict resolvers are special and specialized, but at the same time we are fellow human beings who are not really different from the rest of the folks in society, in terms of egos, self-interests, personalities, habits of the heart, emotions, livelihood, face-honoring or face-losing, and so forth. Our own difficulties bear incredible commonalities and similarities with those in other walks of life, perhaps with the exception of our deeper, heartfelt frustrations when we realize we are the very specialists who should be most capable of taking the time applying our skills to address these problems with our own colleagues.

Reflection of Market Economy

       This is inherently related to the above reflexivity. We need to make a living like anyone else outside the field. Conflict resolvers and peacemakers happen to operate in the same competitive market economy environments. In any given practicing arenas or regions, helping parties may compete with one another over consulting opportunities, training offerings, and other related businesses.

Reflection of Divergent Commitments

       We have many commitments in different arenas of life and career such as the personal, the professional, the social, the political, the cultural, and the philosophical. These commitments may be compatible or incompatible within ourselves and/or among ourselves. It is similar to role conflicts in social life. For those academic organizations and civic groups where we support their survival and success, resources and means are always limited, which may lead to competitions.

Reflection of Interdisciplinary Incongruence

       Conflict resolution has been evolving on the bases of multidisciplinary inquiries, multi-professional practices, and multicultural communities. Given this diversity, we should check out our own assumptions that we think and act alike. Each of us from different backgrounds may not appreciate the same techniques aiming at achieving the shared ideals of amicable, equitable, and sustainable solutions to an issue.

       Furthermore, while there are patterns or regularities of how to handle conflicts that we try to summarize, translate, or generalize for the practice and research, we cannot overestimate the increasing complexities and multidimensionality of human affairs in the contemporary world. Actually, we can never cross the same river twice, as the Chinese folk saying goes.

       These reflections may appear somewhat confusing, illogical, and even paradoxical. In contrast to other helping professions, for example, dentists may not be able to treat their family members' dental problems, while pediatricians may not be able to diagnose their own kids, though they suffer from the illnesses that they were professionally trained to cure. We are not really alone in this context. The fields of peacemaking and conflict resolution will continue to progress, if we can share our stories and learn from other professions and disciplines.

       Each of the above reflections is also a research postulate, which I would like to invite our colleagues and students to explore and investigate. There are certainly other pieces that we have not touched upon, and other angles that we have not taken. There is so much we do not know yet. One central theme of this brief examination is around the issues of self-awareness, self-interest, self-modeling, and self-reflection, instead of putting blame on the outside world (Yang, 1996, 2001). This theme, similar to other topics in the arts and sciences, is culturally defined and often shaped in special reference to individualism that is a core cultural value in the U.S. In plain language, individualism looks at the individual as a primary order while everything else is secondary. The starting point and ending destination are within the individuality itself.

       One particular approach to address these challenging issues is of self-reflection. I made a presentation on this topic in 1996, maintaining that self-reflection is not self-blaming. Self-reflection has an explicit future orientation of how we can do things differently and better next time from a variety of lenses (Yang, 1996). In certain cultures, e.g. some East Asian societies, the ability and skills of conducting self-reflections are often perceived as being responsible,

respectable, constructive, confident, and competent. Self-reflection pinpoints that helping parties need help and assistance in taking care of ourselves.

In other words, there is no shortcut in taking care of ourselves or internal strife in the fields. We as practitioners and researchers need to make persistent, conscious, thoughtful efforts in applying the same level of patience, empathy, sophistication, and technique to the internal peacemaking processes as we do in our work with others. For example, the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) offered tips in caring for the caretakers after September 11.

While there are no ready formulae or easy solutions, we certainly have a useful box of tools and instruments that can be adapted and employed to peacemaking among helping parties. This is a necessary advantage, though insufficient. The sufficient conditions exist in our own realization and reflection that we are not really immune from or floating above disharmonies or disputes. One particularly promising but tough approach is through self-modeling, walking the talk or leading by example. In sum, I have raised more questions than answers, as I sincerely invite you to join in this journey toward harmony of life and productivity of careers in peace building and conflict resolution that people are calling the new millennium field.

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