

# WHERE IS CONFLICT MEDIATION USED? A 20-YEAR PERIOD SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

Mediation is widely considered an effective means of conflict resolution. Although some studies mention social environments where this practice takes place, they do so in an introductory or general manner. The objective of this study is to categorize social environments where conflict mediation is used and provide examples of conflicts that are tackled through mediation. A systematic literature review was designed to examine 207 articles published in scientific journals, for a 20-year period (1994-2014). Results showed five social environments (family, educational/academic, work/professional, community/national, and international contexts) and 45 subcategories of themes related to each context. The wide use of conflict mediation and its importance were discussed in the light of the Ecological Systems Theory.

**Keywords:** conflict mediation, social environments, Ecological Systems Theory

## INTRODUCTION

Inevitable in human interactions, conflicts are not necessarily pathological or destructive, because they can prevent the stagnation that comes from constant accordance (Moscovici, 2010). When intervening, one must first understand the nature of a conflict. For that purpose, a typology is offered by Moore (2003): *data conflicts* may be caused by absent or wrong information, different viewpoints and interpretations, and procedure assessments; *interest conflicts* by competition, interest on procedures, and psychological interest;

*value conflicts* by behavioral assessment criteria, objectives, lifestyles, ideology, and religion; *relationship conflicts* by strong emotions, perceptions or stereotypes, communication, and behavioral patterns; and *structural conflicts* by destructive patterns, resource distribution, power issues, uncooperative factors, and time pressure.

Throughout the last years, mediation has been considered a very effective way to tackle human conflicts. Conflict mediation is basically a process that facilitates dialogue because it is coordinated by an impartial third party who helps identifying common interests in order to reach some kind of agreement (Firmeza, 2011). It is a de-

velopment of negotiation strategies (Moore, 2003) that focus on communication processes (Fiorelli, Fiorelli, & Malhadas, 2008). That is why the hegemonic juridical system, oriented by a “win-lose” logic, is progressively adopting conflict mediation as an alternative form of dispute resolution and as a method to counter judicialization (Alberton, 2009; Firmeza, 2011).

If inherent to human interaction, conflicts are obviously present in any social environments. Social environments are not only the physical surroundings, but also the social relationships and cultural atmosphere where people and groups interact (Barnett & Casper, 2001). In this point of view, local areas are not isolated social environments, but rather they are connected to each other through larger social, economic, and power systems (Barnett & Casper, 2001).

This leads us to make connections between the concepts of social environments (Barnett & Casper, 2001) and Uri Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979). The author states that an ecological environment is “a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). This concept, understood as a nested perspective, is amplified by Neal and Neal (2013), who propose a networked perspective of ecological systems. They do not see the structures in nested arrangements, but rather in overlapping arrangements, linking each structure to the other by direct or indirect interactions among the participants of these social environments (Neal & Neal, 2013). Regardless of the perspective taken (nested or networked), the ecological systems are theorized as five mutually interactive systems that influence on the development of individuals and their learning processes: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

The *microsystem*, as originally defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979), is a setting with physical characteristics where the individual will experience patterns of relationships, activities, and roles. This is a nested perspective of the microsystem – a smaller system within a larger one. A networked perspective will see the setting itself as people engaging in social interactions (Neal & Neal, 2013). This appears to remove the materiality of microsystems from places to interactions, thus enlarging the concept and its usage. The *mesosystem* will be seen as settings in interrelations according to a nested perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The developing person is seen as an active participant in the interaction among systems. Another way to define mesosystem follows the networked perspective, conceptualizing it as “a social interaction between participants in different settings that both include the focal individual” (Neal & Neal, 2013, p. 724). The *exosystem* differs from the previous for not involving the developing person as an active participant, but rather it represents interactions among systems that affect the individual within them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This nested perspective is transformed into networked when exosystems are seen as settings which do not include the individual but whose participants directly or indirectly interact with him/her (Neal & Neal, 2013). The *macrosystem* is defined by the consistency of cultural codes, belief systems, and ideologies in a nested perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A networked view would see it as the relationships among ecological systems, that is, interactions formed or dissolved by social patterns that govern them (Neal & Neal, 2013). Finally, the *chronosystem*, in a nested perspective, represents changes and continuities over periods of time involving the environments in which the person lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). A nested perspective of chronosystems would consider it as “the observation that patterns of social interactions between individuals change over time, and that such changes impact the focal individual, both directly and by altering the configuration of ecological systems around him/her” (Neal & Neal, 2013, p. 724).

Although some works mention the diversity of contexts in which conflict mediation is used as an effective form of intervention (Firmeza, 2011; Menkel-Meadow, 2004; Moore, 2003; Oliveira & Ramires, 2011), they do so in an introductory or generalized manner. Having stated the importance of mediation as a means of tackling conflicts and the diversity of contexts in which human interactions take place, the present study has the objective to answer the question: in which social environments is conflict mediation used as a form of conflict resolution?

## METHOD

A systematic literature review was designed to find articles published in scientific journals from 1994 to 2014. Inclusion criteria were, aside

from publication period, the mention of conflict mediation as a practice to tackle conflicts in different social environments. Exclusion criteria were any other text format (e.g.: theses, dissertations, books, book chapters, etc.) and languages different from English, Spanish and Portuguese. As a search strategy, we utilized two strings: “mediation AND conflict” and “mediación AND conflictos”. The search was performed in October, 2014.

The string “conflict AND mediation” was used in Portal da CAPES (197 articles), EBSCOhost (173 articles), PsycARTICLES (168 articles), and Cochrane Library (19 articles). The string “mediación AND conflictos” was used in BVS-ULAPSI (44 articles) and CLASE (5 articles). A Google Form was created to extract the following data from a total of 606 articles: language; year of publication; authorship; title and subtitle; and article link. Two independent researchers (the first and second authors of this article) separately extracted the information above. After that, together, the researchers compared the information to exclude 346 repeated articles between databases and other 53 due to inclusion and exclusion criteria.

A total of 207 articles were selected for the next step: the researchers categorized core social environments and respective subcategories that were related to conflict mediation in each article’s abstract and then compared each other’s categorization. When the two researchers disagreed on the categorization, the third author of this article decided on the best. Frequencies were calculated using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Version 23.0).

## RESULTS

From a total of 207 articles, 148 (71,5%) were published in English, 33 (15,9%) in Spanish, and 26 (12,6%) in Portuguese. Figure 1 shows the distribution of publications from 1994 to 2014. Publications were more numerous in 2011 (11,6%), 2013 (11,1%), 2007 (9,2%), 2010 (7,7%), and 1999 (7,2%).

The categorization process showed six core themes: five social contexts and one we labelled as “theoretical studies”, because they were articles that did not mention a specific social context and generally approached theory, method, and technique of mediation as a means of tackling conflicts. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the five core themes.

Within each of the five main categories, we identified subcategories that represent a variety of contexts in which conflict mediation was applied:

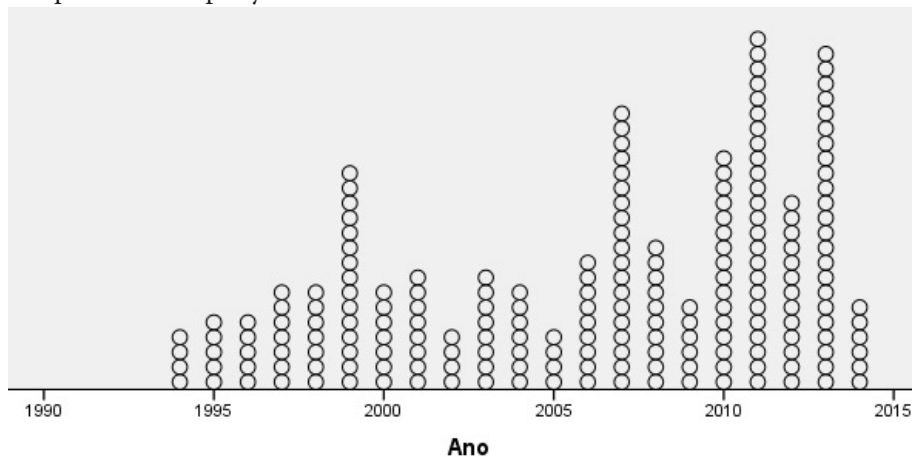
1) Family context (31 articles, 5 subcategories): divorce and separation (14); shared custody and alimony (8); interpersonal relations among family members, communication processes, parenthood and adolescents, sibling conflicts, and family members with psychiatric disorders (5); conjugal/marital violence (2); gender issues in conjugal/marital violence (2).

2) Educational/academic context (32 articles, 6 subcategories): conflict and violence at schools, violence among students, violence between students and teachers (9); racial conflicts among college roommates (1); criminal gangs at schools (1); family conflicts related to schools (1); violence prevention, Pedagogy of Coexistence, mediation used as a technique for personal development (10); teaching and learning issues, cognitive-behavioral aspects, skills development, capacitation, mediation used to design a new school model (10).

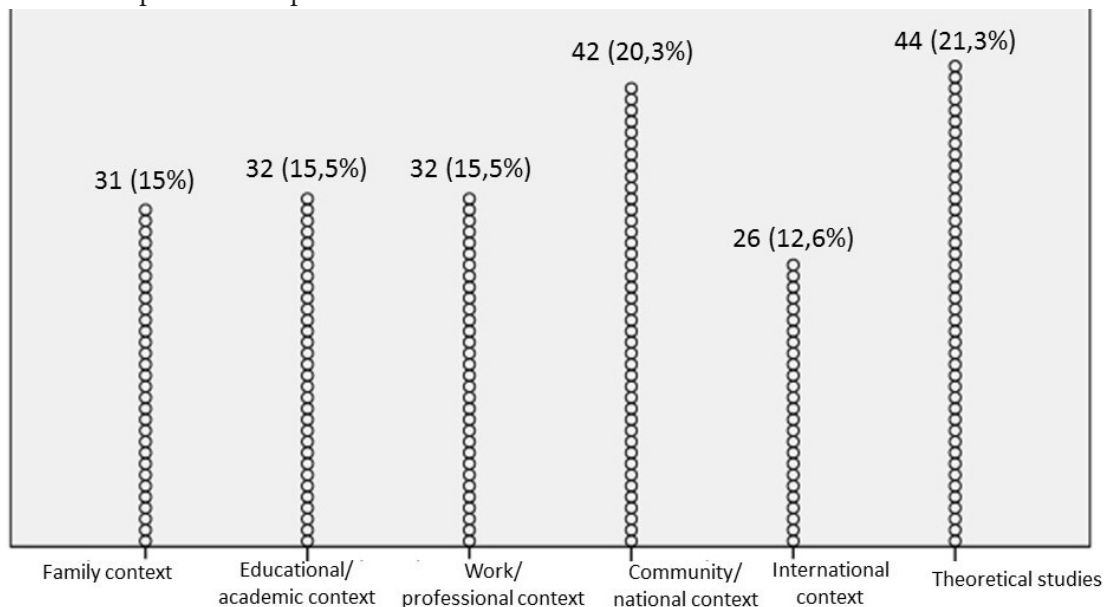
3) Work/professional context (32 articles, 11 subcategories): organizational conflicts in small, medium and large-size companies (3); financial management, joint ventures, and human resources (3); copyright conflicts (1); succession processes in family businesses (1); conflict mediation specifically in the engineering field (1); inter-relations at work place; focus on communication (5); hierarchal conflicts (1); litigious processes related to health services, hospital management, and health system (10); tutelary advice and child abuse (1); palliative care and life and death issues between the health team and patient’s family (3); work health (3).

4) Community/national context (42 articles, 14 subcategories): mediation for peace culture, reconciliation, and pacification (4); ethnic conflicts (3); religious conflicts (2); acculturation and enculturation of natives and foreigners, immigrants and emigrants (2); mechanisms for governance, public policies, estate planning, estate reconstruction, and governability (8); public policies for women’s health – HIV-aids prevention methods (1); alcoholism (1); adolescents in conflict with law and justice (4); prison environment (2); women’s police department and gender violence (1); eviction notice and occupation in slums (1); gangs and criminal factions; ceasefire, disarmament (2); geo-environmental issues, en-

**Figure 1.**  
Distribution of publications per year.



**Figure 2.**  
Distribution of publications per core themes.



vironment contamination and preservation, pollution, relations between industry and community, ecosystems, and tourism (8); conflicts between neighbors and land/property disputes (3).

5) International context (26 articles, 9 sub-categories): general international conflicts, political science, international politics, diplomacy, international and intercultural disputes, international crises, and economic relations (15); demobilization of Colombian militias (1); Israel X Palestine (2); Israel X Egypt (1); Greece X Turkey and Iran X Iraq (1); Namibia's independence (1); Norway X Sri Lanka (2); Northern Ireland X England – Protestants and Catholics (2); Islamic mediation in Turkey (1).

## DISCUSSION

If the individual's development is given within the interrelations of systems where he/she takes part (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013), then it also implies that conflicts will be present within all these systems. We also know that if social environments (Barnett & Casper, 2001) offer emotional and social relationships, with affection and reciprocity, the individuals may improve their processes of development through the interactions they experience within these systems (Polleto & Koller, 2008). Thus, we feel safe to affirm that conflict mediation should



be employed to promote healthier relationships at all systemic levels.

The social environments identified in this research (family, educational/academic, work/professional, community/national, and international) can be said to be the most relevant contexts where human interactions take place. Different conflicts were tackled through mediation at almost all systemic levels: micro, meso, exo, and macro.

Given the importance of the structure of microsystems (e.g., family, work, school) to ensure the proximal processes that support an individual's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), our research showed examples of conflicts within microsystems that were tackled through mediation. Divorce, shared custody, conjugal violence, and sibling conflicts are illustrations of interactions within the family microsystem. Racial conflicts among college roommates, violence among students, and violence between students and teachers are examples of conflicts in the educational/academic microsystem. Organizational problems among employees and between employees and employers exemplify conflicts in a work/professional microsystem.

Mesosystemic interactions happen when an individual will interact in one social environment (e.g., at school) influenced by the interactions developed in other social environments (e.g., family) (Polleto & Koller, 2008). Examples of conflicts at this systemic level were also shown in the results, for example, family conflicts related to schools, life and death issues between the health team and patient's family, conflicts between neighbors and land/property disputes, and racial conflicts among college roommates. These mesosystemic conflicts were successfully approached by conflict mediation.

Conflicts present in exosystems do not directly involve the individual's participation but affect him/her because of the environmental conditions where the individual is present (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013). Some subcategories found in this research may illustrate how exosystemic conflicts may influence on the individual's development, for example, public policies for women's health, environment contamination and preservation, public policies to prevent violence, health system policies, etc. Actually, any public policies or form of government in a given country may affect the individual's development

even without his/her direct participation.

Cultural norms and values that form the macrosystems are also in constant conflict. In a national level, for example, gender issues in conjugal/marital violence, ethnic or religious conflicts, and acculturation and enculturation processes are examples of macrosystemic conflicts that affect all inferior systems (micro, meso, exo). International conflicts may also be caused by these macrosystems' cultural differences, such as the religious conflicts between Northern Ireland and England or Israel and Palestine.

The various forms of conflict found in this research were all connected to studies that investigated their resolution through mediation techniques. Although we have not systematically analyzed their efficacy, throughout the reading of the abstracts we could observe favorable results in most studies. If we need to counter the judicialization culture (Alberston, 2009; Firmeza, 2011), then the practice of mediation may assist conflict resolution strategies within any kind of social environments.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present research objectively showed five social environments in which conflict mediation is used and presented 45 subcategories that illustrate the diversity within each context. We also showed that these social environments cover all systems within which the individual develops and learns, according to the Ecological Systems Theory. This means that mediation can be used as a form of conflict resolution wherever human interactions – thus conflicts – take place.

This research may present limitations as we did not take into account text formats different from articles published in scientific journals. Such materials are widely available and could also be considered in future research. Another suggestion for future studies is to assess the reasons why publications were considerably more numerous in specific years, namely 2011, 2013, 2007, 2010, and 1999.

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