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Transforming Cultural Conflict in an Age of Complexity

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**Transforming
Cultural Conflict in an
Age of Complexity**

Michelle LeBaron

Abstract

This article will survey several definitions of culture, arguing that the most useful approach is to define culture broadly and to recognize its significance to most or all conflicts. Some of the ways that culture affects conflicts will be outlined, accompanied by examples. These include: culture as a lens that both facilitates and blocks effective communication; culture and world view differences as the subject of conflicts; and conflicts related to identity and recognition as facets of cultural differences. Further discussed are Western models of third party intervention, inviting readers to examine the values and assumptions underlying them. Challenges inherent in developing appropriate processes will be discussed. Concluding the article are recommendations for process design in culturally complex conflicts.

About the Contributor

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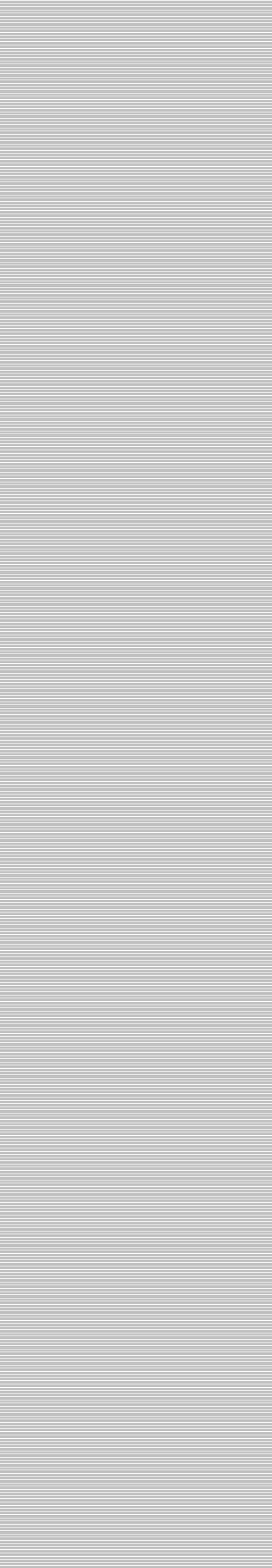
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Recent years have seen an explosion of interest in the cultural dimensions of conflict. Books, studies, and courses have offered perspectives on the nature of culture and its complex relationship to the transformation of conflict. Yet, ethnic and cultural fault-lines in multiple destructive conflicts continue to bring high-profile reminders of the frailty of our approaches when faced with generational hatred and enemy identities.

What has brought culture onto centre stage as a feature of conflict? Among other factors, the role of world militaries continues to shift from cold war strategies of deterrence to hot peace missions of peace keeping and peace building. These deployments typically involve multinational forces in countries divided by intense ethnic conflicts, necessitate extended interaction with local cultures, and frequently include efforts to strengthen civil societies that are deeply rooted in diverse cultural and historical traditions. Thus, these teams themselves experience cultural miscommunications and conflicts as they are dealing with the same in the populations they have come to serve.

Civil wars, sectarian bloodshed, resistance movements, and similar forms of social conflict occur more often than not within states along distinctly cultural fault lines, with Bosnia and Rwanda being the most cited examples (Kaldor 1999). Even the more traditional “state to state” disputes, such as India-Pakistan and Taiwan-China, that threaten to escalate violently are about “culture” as much as access to scarce resources and regional balances of power.

Several writers have explored the importance of culture to conflict in the light of these developments. Some minimize the divisive influence of cultural differences, maintaining that human actions are rooted in and explained by universally understandable rational processes (Burton 1987). Despite differences in customs related to food, dress, and religious practices, “we are all alike under the skin”. Taken to the extreme, adherents of this view see culture as the product of the human genome, that is, a diverse menu of behaviours all rooted in shared biological and psychological needs. Approaches to conflict based on this philosophy attempt to create a common language and a problem-solving process based on an appeal to shared ‘human needs’.

While we indeed share some fundamental human needs, this frame obscures the real effects of differences that operate on many levels ranging from miscommunications and misunderstandings to conflicts about values and world views themselves. Scholars from feminist perspectives and cultural studies remind us that the picture is complex and the playing field uneven. Differences are deep-rooted and linked to identity in ways that cannot be easily homogenized in a western-

conceived process for conflict transformation arising from an individualist, atomised approach.

Others, for example Samuel Huntington (1993), have responded to the post-cold war world by predicting a coming “clash of civilizations”. He writes “that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic [but] cultural.”

The ultimate extension of this school of thought is the belief that culture is an immutable set of essential differences among groups not amenable to transcendence. While Huntington is right about the deep-rooted nature of culture, culture is in fact more fluid, versatile and dynamic than his model allows: Culture also operates as a positive organizing force that lends coherence, meaning and richness to life. It is a medium for relationship both within groups and among groups. Culture offers a system of symbols translated into behaviours that can operate as a bridge for outsiders, even if sometimes it may feel like a drawbridge. In reality, culture is neither a formidable fortress nor a dispensable platform; it is an integral part of human existence that has the potential to serve as an important resource in transforming intercultural conflict.

In this article, I will focus on ways culture operates both as a resource and a barrier. The next section will present three metaphorical perspectives: first, culture as a lens, secondly, culture as a medium for sustaining life, and, lastly, culture as a symbolic, interactive system, both shaping and reflecting identity and meaning. Each of these perspectives informs the contextual approach to transforming intercultural conflict that I will present in the final section.

II. Cultural Dynamics in Conflict

All conflicts entail interpersonal interactions that occur in the context of cultures. The exact influence of culture will differ from person to person as no two individuals from the same country, region, religion, socio-economic class, gender or generation will exhibit the same constellation of cultural behaviours and attitudes. Power further complicates conflicts, operating at the symbolic level to shape what seems natural or reasonable in any given situation. A history of inequitable interactions between dominant and subdominant groups leads to emotionally charged communication and increases the likelihood of conflict escalation (Weiss 2000).

An adequate response to conflict requires a sophisticated understanding of culture, borrowing from many disciplines and extensive experience. Culture shapes not only the possibilities for resolution or transformation, but also the naming, interpretation, enactment and

course of conflicts. Culture is many things: it is a set of lenses through which all parties to a conflict necessarily see. Resulting from the lenses' omnipresent, we are usually unaware of their existence. Culture is also the medium in which behavioural patterns and values grow and are passed on one generation to the next. Deep-rooted conflicts become embedded in cultural stories and myths and thus more resistant to transformation. Finally, culture shapes and reflects identity formation and the way we make and assign meaning. Humans are essentially creatures who assign meaning, or 'meaning-making', we seek to explain, to understand, to make sense of our worlds and ourselves in our worlds. Because we do this frequently in the context of relationships, I have chosen the metaphor of intimate relationship to convey the dynamics of culture at this symbolic level.

Each of these metaphors expresses the complexity and unconscious dynamics rooted in culture. Triandis (1990) reminds us that all groups tend to define what happens in their own culture as "natural" and "right", and what happens in other cultures as "unnatural" and "incorrect". In-group norms are usually perceived as applicable to others, even to those outside the national or cultural group. Members of one culture group are inclined to believe that it is expected and natural to help and favour one another, and to feel pride towards their own. Unfortunately, this pride is often coupled with hostility towards outsiders. Resulting from these perceptual and attitudinal biases, clarity about culture and conflict is elusive, yet important to any transformative process.

Many theorists have developed tools to help make sense of the complexity of culture. David Augsberger (1992) provides one of the most comprehensive summaries of various frameworks and perspectives. Research into intercultural communication provides the distinction between individualist and collectivist cultures as one way of clustering differences (Brislin 1990, Triandis 1990). Lederach (1995) offers a further set of tools to differentiate ways of seeing, being and making sense of the world.

These tools can be used in conflict analysis, an oft-neglected part of intercultural conflict intervention, i.e., in exploring which action should be taken, by whom and how while focusing on cultural factors. Many writers have emphasized the importance of analysis, though it is very difficult to engage in it when the exigencies of time, political agendas and potential harm create pressure for action. The most effective and durable interventions are those accompanied by ongoing cultural analysis.

I will consider implications for analysis, intervention and training for each of the three metaphorical ways of looking at culture: culture as lens, culture as a medium for behaviour and values, and culture as a relationship which both shapes and reflects identity and meaning.

II.1 Culture as a Lens

Culture colours everything we see. It is impossible to leave our cultural lenses at the door to a process; without perspective and experiences through which we interpret and intuit the way forward, we would be impotent to transform conflicts. Our cultural legacy gives us a range of behaviours from which to choose; it gives us a “common sense” of conflict and how to approach it. Three implications of this view of culture and related practice tips follow.

While we cannot easily separate from or take off our lenses, we can become aware of their colours, their gradations, what they show us and what they screen out.

Just as a coloured lens distorts other colours on the spectrum, so our cultural lenses show us the things we expect to see and obscure those we do not expect. Empirical research has shown, for example, that when someone was introduced to therapists as a “patient”, the therapists tended to rate them as more disturbed than those that had been introduced to as a “job applicant” (Langer and Abelson, 1974). As a family mediator, I once discounted the suggestion made by a divorcing parent that the only child of the marriage go to live with grandparents in an Asian country. Why? My cultural lenses screened out this option because of my individualist notion that children of divorce need the close proximity to both biological parents. This misconception stems from assuming the family to be nuclear, rather than recognizing the validity of the extended family circle typical in more collectivist cultures.

It may be possible to try on different cultural lenses even if we cannot ever fully assume them as our own.

Even the effort of trying to look through the hue of another’s lenses to see what they magnify and what they minimize is important. Such an attempt is important not only for understanding another’s perspective, but also for the empathy and trust that are generated in the process of trying. When someone else makes a genuine effort to see things the way another sees them, authentic dialogue becomes more possible. This is true regardless of whether the conflict is interpersonal or played out on the international stage. This is exemplified in the recent hijacking of an Afghani airliner at Stansted Airport near London. Negotiators relied on passages from the Koran concerning injunctions against suicide and murder in a successful effort to gain the release of those on board. The willingness to entertain the lens of another, while challenging, was critical to the successful transformation of the conflict.

The process of addressing conflict may involve an adjustment of our lenses. If this willingness is maintained, would-be-interveners will increase the likelihood of their success.

Our vision is limited when we are looking through old glasses. Lenses need to be readjusted to current conditions. Similarly, personal experiences with people from “the other side” challenge stereotypes and preconceived notions of who “they” are. Participants in dialog processes with “the other” have repeatedly reported that one of the most valuable outcomes was discovering commonalities and complexities. These included aspects of who they were as individuals that had been previously obscured by the generalizations promulgated by the media and home constituent groups. This further emphasises the need to continuously modify our lenses to maintain the added clarity we have gained.

Practice Tips

If culture is a set of lenses, the following ideas are useful in practice, whether in training or intervention:

Be conscious of your own lenses, and advocate that all parties reflect upon their own perceptions.

Due to differing lenses, perceptions will always be dependant on individual expectations and experiences. Consequently the search for the “truth” is not useful in conflict. Graphics like that of an old woman/young woman or other pictorial reminders that there is more than one dimension and interpretation to everything may be useful in making this point. Games in which people become aware of their interpretation of ambiguous events are also helpful.

Deliberately choose language that reinforces participants’ understanding of culture as a lens.

Parties should be invited to “try on each other’s glasses” and asked questions such as “How do you think your past experience is influencing the way you see this proposal?” This explores the role of culturally-influenced interpretation and choice in blocking progress on a specific issue.

In training, encourage participants to unpack the components of their lenses.

This can be achieved by encouraging reflections on what is “right” and “proper” in conflict and how approaches to conflict are derived from family and educational background. Answers to these questions bring insight into the way cultural common sense has been formed and opens the possibility of making conscious choices when involved in a conflict situation.

II.2 Culture as the Medium for Behaviour and Values

Sometimes, trying on the lenses of another is not enough. In long-term or deep-rooted conflicts, it is important to get beyond the lenses to values and cultural logic. This logic, like the lenses, is largely invisible to group members. It becomes clear to outsiders only when they encounter boundaries by violating unspoken behavioural or value norms. Think of a time when you have travelled in a culture different from your national culture. As you interacted with locals, how did you know when you had stepped over a boundary? Were there times when you were able to use this experience as a window into an exploration of the medium, the cultural air breathed by the group? It is essential to recognize the medium in which a cultural group lives, including how they interpret history, define their social identity, and create a system of values. Recognition and understanding of the medium are an important part of developing positive relationships.

A classic but tragic example of a failure to understand the cultural logic of the other comes from the case of the Egyptian-Israeli conflict during the 1960's. Avruch (1998) explains that both sides relied on culturally distinctive policies in a "dialogue of the deaf" that escalated the conflict. Israeli officials believed that responding to acts of Egyptian violence with disproportionate force would deter aggressive behaviour by making it very costly. The Egyptians, however, saw the Israeli responses as unconscionable efforts to attack their honour, which had to be met. Incorrect interpretations of the other side's behaviours led to tragic effects for both parties.

Even when one medium is similar to another, it will respond differently when environmental factors vary. Even when a similar value is shared by two groups, it may be manifested very differently determined by culture. For example, the concept of self-reliance varies from collectivist to individualist contexts. In collectivist cultures, children are taught that it means "I will not be a burden on my community/ family", while in individualist cultures, the message is "I can do it on my own" (Triandis 1990).

Sometimes, elements of the medium itself become issues in conflict. Barber's book *Jihad versus McWorld* describes globalism in direct conflict with local, tribal and cultural identities. Community values and personal responsibility that characterize Asian societies are at odds with the individualism and consumerism of the United States. Interpersonal, inter-organizational and international conflicts arise from these differences. At the same time, the medium of culture is becoming more homogenized. As *The Economist* recently argued, the strong continuing trend toward democracy in South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia and elsewhere in Asia suggest that, at least in business, "the Asian way is proving very like everyone else's."

Three implications follow from conceptualising culture as a medium that sustains the mental, moral and economic equipment for life. First, culture is always relevant, just as the medium in a biological experiment is significant to whether and how a specimen will grow. Secondly, the medium changes as the environment around it changes. No cultural group is immune to pressure, influence and ideas from other groups. Power dynamics, in particular, play a key role in affecting how change comes about and in which directions. Finally, the medium is life-sustaining. It is essential for the ongoing development of the group and therefore must be respected and protected. These implications carry their own paradoxes and challenges, which will be outlined briefly in the following.

Culture is always relevant

If culture is defined broadly, that is, including many types and levels of difference, all conflicts are ultimately intercultural. This comprehensive definition has the benefit of admitting culture as an element of every conflict analysis, even at the cost of an over-emphasis on cultural factors. This is a positive development, and surely preferable to the identification of culture as a factor only when there are visible or ethno-cultural differences separating parties. The medium is always an important part of the message.

At the same time, the medium should not be used to deflect discussions about choices and behaviours. In the face of death or injury, it is insufficient to reply, “I did it because my culture requires it!” There will always be many levels of interpretation and opinion of what a specific culture suggests or requires in a given case. While there are Moslem men who kill their sisters or wives when they uncover premarital sex or marital infidelity, other Moslems maintain that this is an action neither required nor even approved by the Holy Koran.

The state of the medium is related to constancy or change in its environment.

A medium remains in a consistent form when environmental factors are constant over time. The concept of culture as a static medium reinforces the claim “we have always done it that way”. This statement implies a proven justification for the chosen approach. However, to repeat past customary behavioural patterns will, in turn, replicate results from the past. Hence, it is crucial to entertain ideas of doing things differently if past cycles of violence, suffering are to be broken and systems of inequality and disadvantages altered. Fortunately, contemporary cultures are not a static medium, but are, in fact, influenced by change and efforts to create change at many levels.

The cultural norm of bureaucratic efficiency, for example, has been rejected by indigenous peoples in many contexts. Their attempts to achieve justice using bureaucratic processes have been unsuccessful because they felt that neither their concerns nor their relationships with one another and the environment were acknowledged or even addressed. In the environmental and public policy arena, activists are turning their attention to ways that agendas privilege one category of interests over another. Middle Eastern countries, exemplified by Iran and Egypt, are sites of an ongoing and rich internal dialogue about both the balancing of Islamic cultural traditions with Western modernity and the realities of our global village. Contrary to the past, diverse perspectives of and multiple influences on how to achieve the balance between the secular and religious influences make it impossible to presume uniform cultural norms.

Culture is life-sustaining and generative.

When cultural values and norms are directly linked to environment changes, it is useful to explore them in the course of addressing a conflict. Cultural values produce behaviours, attitudes and attributions that, in turn, contribute to conflict. Exploring the medium in which these values develop can provide important avenues for the discovery of common ground among those on opposite sides of a conflict.

Any discovery of common ground will, however, remain dependent upon subsequent events. If a legal challenge results in a substantial victory for one side over the other, the “loser” might focus more energy on their advocacy identity rather than any common ground experience. At the same time, the experience of dialogue itself renders it impossible to sustain the same “enemy image” of the other as before. Empathy develops through dialogue, thus forming a powerful factor in transforming the conflict, especially at the local level (LeBaron and Carstarphen, 1997).

Practice Tips

If culture is a medium in which all of our beliefs, values, and world views develop, then we will never be able to differentiate ourselves from it. It sustains us, allows us to mature, as beings encapsulated. We may learn other cultural ways, but never be free of those that are most deeply embedded in us. Even global nomads, who grow up in various places around the world, learn cultural ways from their families and the mix of environments in which they find themselves. Culture is invisible to those surrounded by it, and yet omnipresent.

Practice Tips (cont.)

Trainers and interveners should therefore:

- *Consider how culture influences any given interaction;*
- *Conduct a thorough and ongoing cultural assessment of all conflicts;*
- *Involve cultural informants as resources in understanding the cultural dimensions of behaviour;*
- *Recognize cultural competence as an essential part of training for interveners;*
- *Reflect on the conditions, or the medium, that is needed for prospective solutions to take root and grow.*

For example, interveners may ask questions like: Are cultural changes necessary within the group, the community or the organization to sustain the solution? What nutrients can provide continuous support to those who are implementing the solution? How will the growth and development of the solution be monitored?

Invite participants into activities that generate empathy such as a “shared walk” through a contentious part of history in which members of opposing groups in age-old conflicts are encouraged to identify key dates and events from the past in ways that are agreed by both sides.

In this way, a common medium is generated that can sustain future activities and enable joint planning.

Use dialogic techniques that contribute to the development of positive relationships over time.

While dialog may seem long and difficult without providing a direct link to specific outcomes, it is essential to building a foundation from which transformative solutions may be crafted.

II.3 Culture as Intimate Relationship

Culture, like intimate relationships or deep friendships, is dynamic, multidirectional, and interactive. It is constantly changing, adapting, reshaping and engage in a continuous exchange with other cultural systems. In today’s information age, cultures influence each other quickly and dramatically. On the Internet, diverse cultural systems are made available throughout the world and in quick succession. As the web becomes globally accessible, these systems will affect and change each other more and more rapidly. Culture in this view is more than a medium; it is a complex relational system with multiple dimensions.

I chose the metaphor of intimate relationship because it conveys the constant change and multileveled interaction that characterizes cultures. In the interpersonal sphere of intimate relationships, in response to my irritation with my partner, my partner's response will reflect tension, defensiveness, reciprocal irritation or apology. Because our relationship is ongoing, we have a multitude of layered interactions each affecting specific choices, moment-by-moment. Furthermore, behaviour adopts textures and meanings over time because a relationship has symbolic dimensions in addition to its physical and relational ones. Similarly, cultural influences both shape and reflect those things that are precious to us: our identity, our bonding with others and the ways we make meaning.

From infancy on, everyone receives cultural messages. They influence who we are, who we believe it is acceptable and unacceptable to be, and how we perceive others and ourselves. They shape our views about conflict and the meanings we attach to behaviours; they shape our efforts to build and sustain relationships and communities. They shape our "common sense", our ideas about what is logical and reasonable. At the same time, they reflect our cultural biases and our worldviews in ways that are often not explicit.

American and Canadian writing about conflict, for example, reflects many such culturally-rooted biases: it tends to be action-oriented and assume autonomous individual actors. It tends to privilege intellect and treat emotions as something to be managed and contained. Collectivist notions of hierarchy, face-saving and lasting links to a place and community go largely unaddressed. Culture itself is often not dealt with or oversimplified. In recent years, however, more academic writing has addressed the centrality of culture, increasing understanding that culture is accountable for framing completely different ways of naming, organizing and enacting the human experience (see, for example, LeBaron, McCandless and Garon 1998). This conceptualisation of culture's influence as pervasive and multidirectional gives rise to several implications:

Conflict operates on the symbolic level, expressing itself culturally in ways that both reflect how parties see themselves and simultaneously shape these perceptions.

Deep-rooted, apparently intractable, conflict always involves more than material resources and communication; rather, it is intricately linked to the symbolic level of identity and meaning-making, thus rendering them the least amenable to change because identity and meaning are so fundamental to our sense of self and position in the world. The issue for the intervener is how to understand and work with these symbolic dimensions.

Accessing this level is challenging. An explicit request for information is unlikely to yield a comprehensive explanation of how identity is related to the conflict and how it is operating as a factor in impasse. Identity contains many elements that are mainly below the surface of our conscious awareness. Yet, when some aspect of our identity is threatened, whether in the realm of gender, ethnicity, or race, we tend to react defensively. Identity is a potent but undisclosed force maintaining conflict in collectivist settings, where communication tends to be indirect, inductive and face-saving, as much as in individualist constellations, where there are idiosyncratic private boundaries and face-saving concerns that preclude direct disclosure of all information.

Conflict is intricately bound up with meaning-making activities. Hence, in order to have transformative effects, interventions must address the level where meaning is made.

The ways in which “meaning is made” tend to be unconscious and implicit, visible only in secondary ways. We infer, for example, that someone is hurt when s/he cries or withdraws. As outsiders, we do not have access to the internal cognitive or emotional processes that lead to the assignment of meaning. Immediate disclosure of information, as favoured by individualist approaches, is not helpful in the inquiry into the meaning-making process; asking directly may only be an additional faux pas that further escalates a conflict. Since these values operate on the symbolic level, symbolic tools are needed for effective analysis and intervention.

John Paul Lederach (1995) suggests paying attention to metaphors to uncover information about how meaning is assigned. Metaphors connect to meaning systems, thus revealing not only information about a particular notion, but also information about its priority or weight and its relationship to other ideas. In a conflict over forested land, for example, a developer speaking of yields, management, replanting and weed species evokes the metaphor of farming. A conservationist, on the other hand, may speak of preservation, balance, beauty and ecosystem integrity, suggesting the metaphor of a haven or sanctuary. Viewed in this light, it is not surprising that the two sides may find it difficult to come to a compatible outcome. They are seeing the conflict’s substance in entirely different lights. An intervener who points this out and can help the two to look at the meanings of their metaphors will be more likely to achieve a transformational outcome than merely an unhappy compromise.

But metaphors have their own limitations: they may not be easily shared or translated across cultural groups; they may be grounded in physical experiences not shared by members of other groups. The invitation to dialogue about metaphors may seem like a detour to those under pressure to achieve results in a painful and contentious conflict.

Metaphors are surely significant as windows into meanings associated with conflict-prone and conflict-relevant issues. While they are used most often indirectly as guides for ongoing analyses by interveners and parties, they also offer a largely-untapped route to transformational outcomes.

Identity and recognition must be addressed in transforming conflict.

When the distinctiveness or self-determination of one people is denied by another, identity and recognition become central to the conflictual relationship. For example, in a workshop held in the early 1990s involving Palestinian and Israeli representatives, a narrative analysis of the dialogue revealed that Palestinians referred to identity and recognition in virtually every exchange on a variety of topics, whereas the theme of security predominated the language of the Israeli discourse. As those from both sides practiced their well-worn discourse, they were engaged in a kind of “parallel play” unlikely to lead to satisfying progress on their conflicts.

While Israelis and Palestinians have since made progress on these issues, there are many other conflicts where continuing resistance to the recognition of a group’s identity has become a major rallying point. This resistance is not just a problem on the diplomatic level; it operates just as potently at the interpersonal level. In one recent workshop involving Greek and Turkish Cypriots, the American organizers noticed an ongoing sense of division in the group. While participants were dutifully engaging in the planned activities targeted to build relationship and rapport, they remained within their own ethno-cultural groups during breaks, meals and evening gatherings. This was not surprising given that group members were in their teens and early twenties and had grown up in a divided community without previous contact or inter-group interaction.

One evening, some of the participants prepared food and invited others to share it with them. Later, instruments emerged and music and dancing followed. To everyone’s surprise, they knew some of the same songs and enjoyed similar foods and dances. After this experience, there was more casual mingling and interaction between members of the two groups (Schirch 1997).

It would be a mistake to conclude that it is therefore important to have groups approaching one another from within a conflict constellation dance and play music together. Though not a bad prescription, the important issue is why it works: Music, dance and food are all related to identity, to the assignment of meaning and recognition. If you sample my family recipe, you are recognizing a part of my culture. As we dance together, we are engaged in a personal and authentic recognition. When you listen to the stories in my songs, you may develop an understanding of the way that I make sense of and assign meaning to

particular events in context. It is because these activities touch the symbolic level that they are so powerful.

As identity, recognition and meaning-making are addressed, a third culture can emerge.

A third culture of common ground can arise among those from divided societies who have shared new experiences. Among Greek and Turkish Cypriots, a bi-communal culture is emerging as more and more individuals have a chance to form personal relationships and thus relate in symbolic as well as practical ways to the other side.

Practice Tips

The beauty of the metaphor of ‘intimate relationship’ lies in the fact that it helps people in conflict understand that they are involved in a dynamic and interactive system that is changing continuously. This is especially salient, as one of the things that always attends escalated, entrenched conflicts is a lack of hope. Listening to people in conflict, typical statements include “It’s always been this way.” or “He never changes.”

Trainers and interveners can:

Emphasize the relational, dynamic flux of culture to help people realize that they are, in fact, constantly influencing each other.

Perceptions of people or groups as static are necessarily flawed. Recognition of this may give some hope and momentum for moving forward.

Emphasize the relational nature of culture as well as its richness as a resource.

In relationships, we continuously give to one another. Similarly, culture can provide rich assistance to parties in conflict. Questions such as “What traditions do we each have that relate to reconciliation?” or “Are there proverbs that would have told your parents what to do in a situation like this?” invite sharing cultural resources.

Describe cultural systems as interwoven relationships when dealing with protracted conflicts.

Despite the age-old conflict, Israelis and Palestinians do not have completely distinct or unrelated cultural identities. Each identity has, in fact, influenced the other: both in ways they are painfully aware of, and in ways they may be oblivious of. Furthermore, each continues to affect the other and to change itself as a product of the interaction. Building on the awareness of interrelationship and interdependence is important to resolving questions of practical concern.

Practice Tips (cont.)

Use symbolic tools including stories, myths, metaphors and rituals to help parties build an understanding of and relationship with the 'other'.

It is often through these channels of symbolic interaction that routes to a more direct communication open up and healing becomes possible.

III. Applying a Complex Understanding of Culture to Intervention

As is clear from the above discussion, culture is neither a fixed entity, nor an insurmountable barrier. Understanding culture as a lens, it is clear that neutrality is never fully accomplished; everyone brings biases and cultural ways of perceiving to the table. Culture seen as a medium elucidates ways that cultural factors are always relevant to the roles of values and meanings in conflicts. Culture as an intimate relationship illustrates its dynamic, systemic nature and the importance of attending to the symbolic level when tapping culture as a resource for transforming conflicts.

Central here is the recognition that cultural lenses are salient for all players in conflict, including potential interveners, and that they are necessarily part of any framework or process of intervention. Thus, questions of fit between the conflict constellation and interveners will figure prominently in any conflict analysis: while assessing the components of process that would best serve those involved, potential interveners must ask themselves whether their own identity and cultural perspectives will diminish or enhance their effectiveness as a third party.

III.1 Self and Process Assessment

The intervener begins with the self and an examination of personal assumptions related to conflict and conflict processes. Concepts of what constitutes a conflict and who is a party, what level of confrontation is appropriate, how issues should be identified and addressed, and what would be seen as resolution or transformation are intricately connected to the intervener's own cultural experiences and perceptions. North American cultural assumptions favour the direct approach of divulging all relevant information. The style may, however, be ill-suited and even offensive to those whose norms prioritise face-saving, indirectness and relational harmony in problem resolution. Similarly, individualist assumptions about who is involved as a party may seem atomised and reductionist to someone whose community or

extended family are part of a relational web, and hence necessarily involved in any attempt at conflict transformation.

Modest notions of what constitutes transformation, such as smaller adjustments or relational developments, may not be shared by parties for whom transformation relates to overthrowing or radically changing a system. These assumptions are so central to any “common sense” of what to do in conflict, whom to deal with and which objectives to strive for, that they must be canvassed prior to any intervention.

Conducting a culturally-centred assessment is a fundamental challenge to the idea that American, Canadian or Western European models of conflict transformation can be exported to other parts of the world. As we have seen, assessment involves an ongoing level of self-assessment as well as an analysis of process, setting, timing and other variables. Conflict process models work because they relate to a level of social consensus about communication, conflict and ways of making meaning; that is, like cultures, they must be understood as specific to a certain conflict scenario and context.

The suitability of a given intervener does not depend only, or even primarily, on skills or training. Rather, it also relates to identity, gender, and the capacity to work effectively inter-culturally. In considering whether a given intervener is appropriate, difficult choices emerge: If I discover that, being a woman, parties find it difficult to accept me in an intervening role because they are from patriarchal cultures where women do not play public roles, shall I follow a culturally sensitive path and defer to men to do the job? Or is it acceptable to push the boundaries of those who have not experienced women in leadership or facilitative capacities? If my ethnicity is likely to inspire questions about my credibility in one or more of the groups in conflict, can I transcend this limitation or should I defer to some one else with a less controversial identity?

These are not simple questions. No one would seriously suggest that, in the name of cultural sensitivity, ethnic and cultural identities must at all costs be matched among parties and interveners. The possible range of identities is too broad and diverse; who would choose which aspect of a party’s identity was the most salient for matching with an intervener? Would gender, race, regional origin, clan, or nationality be used as the criterion for such a match? Despite the acknowledgement in the literature (Lederach 1995) that some groups prefer insider partials to outsider neutrals, aren’t there also times when an insider cannot possibly bring the credibility, the fairness and the manoeuvrability of an esteemed outsider? How are multicultural conflicts to be handled, when there are many cultural groups involved with corresponding levels of complexity?

Given the impracticality and undesirability of cultural or ethnic matching between those in conflict and interveners, how do we allow for the perception of oppressed or victimized groups that they need one of “their own” at the negotiation table? Weiss (2000) details reasons why this may be important in her discussion of power and difference. She points out that even when dominant parties maintain that they are treating everyone equally, the concerns of subordinated parties may go unaddressed. Cultural misunderstandings may be used strategically by those in power to retain their advantage. Then, too, well-meaning interveners from outside a cultural group may have difficulties appreciating the subtleties and dynamics of an issue or of a group’s behaviour within a process. Even those with intercultural expertise are not immune to replicating systemic injustices; they may, in the effort to right these injustices, choose a process that is unacceptable to some parties to the conflict.

These concerns are illustrative of a whole range of issues that should be considered by potential interveners taking a contextual approach to multiparty process design that includes parties from diverse cultures. In a collaborative assessment, parties should be invited to identify preferred identities and desirable capacities of interveners in a dialogue, as well as who will represent the groups at the negotiation table and how the process will unfold.

III.2 Capacities of Effective Intervenors

If the identity of a third party intervener is deemed a complex factor that must be considered carefully, the required capacity of an intervener is even harder to assess. What skills and competence are most important for an intervener to possess? Is it sufficient, for instance, to possess eminence on the world stage? The successful initiatives of former US President Jimmy Carter and former South African President Nelson Mandela in promoting peace and reconciliation seem to suggest so. Yet, protracted conflicts and the prolonged peace processes necessary for conflict transformation require a long-term continuous commitment and very specific skills these world leaders often cannot offer.

At the other end of the spectrum, training in the mediation of domestic and neighbourhood disputes will certainly be insufficient to prepare for working with warring factions, for example in Sierra Leone. Such training is frequently centred in psychological and communication approaches, emphasizing the importance of active listening, restating and process framing skills. While these tools are useful, they are not enough to tackle the multifaceted issues in intercultural conflicts. Complex conflicts call for interventions at many levels. In order to achieve this, a combination of outsider expertise and insider knowledge from within teams, working in tandem, may be the richest resource of all.

Capacities most needed by effective interveners in intercultural conflict include *leadership*, *creativity*, *authenticity*, *empathy* and, of course, *cultural sensitivity*.

Leadership is central to the effective assessment of a situation, the convening of dialogue sessions as well as the intervention in conflict. Effective leaders are able to achieve meaningful collaboration in process design, tapping the strengths and addressing the needs of all parties. They set a positive, appropriate tone, monitor the dynamics of processes for constructive engagement and adjust to changing situations. Crucial here is cultural sensitivity, to the parties' as well as one's own cultural lenses. A good leader checks back frequently to be certain that her/ his "common sense" about the process is something that all of the parties can relate to.

Creativity involves a spirit of curiosity and innovation as well as access to a variety of modalities. When confronted with a culturally complex conflict, an intervener may feel overwhelmed with competing information and dynamics. This may lead interveners to seek to narrow issues and tasks as soon as possible. Experienced interveners may believe that they have some insight into possible outcomes, making it possible to "cut to the chase" of the process. Creative interveners, however, will cultivate an ongoing curiosity about the issues, the parties, the effectiveness of interventions and possible outcomes. As they take the time to discover nuances and understand complexities, relationships are formed and nurtured and an atmosphere of respect is built. In modelling creativity and inquisitiveness, interveners invite others to also experience the possibilities posed by Proust's observation: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." Creativity is thus essential to transforming conflict, for true transformation surely must provide participants with "new eyes".

Authenticity is a measure of the congruence between our inner selves (and our perceptions, knowledge, beliefs) and what we project to the outside. All of our communication skills are effective only to the extent that we use them authentically. This is not to suggest that merely by being well intentioned and sincere will an intervener always be successful. Rather, this means that the intervener who has a high level of self-awareness, sensitivity to others and good intercultural skills is likely to be experienced as more authentic by the parties in conflict. In other words, authenticity is the mark of someone who has insight into her/ his own set of lenses and limiting patterns and is thus able to help others find ways through knots and complex conflicts.

Empathy is another essential capacity for the intercultural intervener: it denotes the experience of thinking and feeling with another. It is a very powerful way to build a working relationship, and is surely

essential to a lasting one. The literature on empathy is extensive, spanning psychology, communication studies and intercultural relations. While there is no single agreed definition, many writers refer to it as the attempt to enter the frame of mind or worldview of another to the extent that this is at all possible. To empathize is not to agree, nor does it require the listener to have had an identical experience in the past. Instead, it means to become the “I” in the other’s story for a moment, feeling, sensing and thinking from that perspective. True empathy is always interactive, and will lead to the creation of a third shared culture (Broome 1993).

Very often, parties impede themselves in empathizing with others by creating enemy images of them, such as regarding the other as chronically unreasonable or irritating. This impression then justifies a feeling of distance, and forecloses the opportunity to make sense of the world from the perspective of the other. While we may have cultural habits of identifying “an other” (Volkan, Julius and Montville 1990) on whom to project negative or unacceptable parts of ourselves, conflict transformation must be concerned with challenging ourselves to move beyond the unconscious but deeply disrespectful practice of seeing an other group as “less than” our own.

Leadership, creativity, authenticity, empathy and sensitivity to culture are important resources in moving beyond long-erected fences and from narrow-minded cultural habits to new ways of relating. Together with process design, structuring skills and political know-how, they are critical to the transformation of intercultural conflicts.

IV. Concluding Thoughts

As culture is multi-faceted, so is the role of the third party in an intercultural conflict: balancing and juggling, motivating and persuading, acting as a catalyst – all of these are required, and more. If culture is a lens, the intervener works to keep it clear and to enlarge its scope so everyone looking through it can glimpse a new future. The medium that previously supported acrimony and pain can be transformed into one of hope and possible dialogue where inquiry replaces stereotypes and assumptions. Finally, conceptualising culture as an intimate relationship that both shapes and reflects identity and symbolic meaning, brings us to the heart of conflict transformation. In the end, the metaphor of relationship becomes itself the process through which transformation is achieved.

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