



The effectiveness of a mediation program in symmetrical versus asymmetrical neighbor-to-neighbor conflicts

Elze G. Ufkes

Department of Social Psychology, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Ellen Giebels

Department of Psychology of Conflict, Risk & Safety, University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands, and

Sabine Otten and Karen I. van der Zee

Department of Social Psychology, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Abstract

Purpose – The last decades, neighborhood mediation programs have become an increasingly popular method to deal with conflicts between neighbors. In the current paper the aim is to propose and show that conflict asymmetry, the degree to which parties differ in perceptions of the level of conflict, may be important for the course and outcomes of neighborhood mediation.

Design/methodology/approach – Data for testing the hypotheses were based on coding all (261) files of neighbor conflicts reported to a Dutch neighborhood mediation program in the period from 2006 through 2008.

Findings – As expected, cases were more often about asymmetrical than symmetrical conflicts. Moreover, compared to symmetrical conflicts, asymmetrical conflicts less often led to a mediation session; the degree of escalation was lower; and, particularly in asymmetrical conflicts, a mere intake session already contributed to positive conflict outcomes.

Originality/value – Past research on the effectiveness of mediation programs mainly focused on cases in which a mediation session effectively took place. However, persuading parties to participate in a mediation session forms a major challenge for mediators. In fact, many cases that are signed-up for mediation programs do not result in an actual mediation. The current study examines the entire mediation process – from intake to follow-up.

Keywords Conflict asymmetry, Community mediation, Neighbour conflicts, Escalation, Conflict resolution, The Netherlands, Negotiating, Communities

Paper type Research paper



Neighbor-to-neighbor conflicts may seriously impact the quality of life in one's neighborhood. Although these disputes oftentimes concern "small" nuisances, such as conflicts about noise, unmaintained gardens or pets, the psychological impact for the parties involved may be quite severe. Over time such conflicts may escalate into physical assault and even death (Paquin and Gambrell, 1994). Recent examples of such dramatic incidents include a 55-year-old male in Raincy in France, shooting his upstairs neighbors because of a conflict over noise (Le Post, 2009), and a man in the San Diego area shooting his next door neighbors because of an ongoing dispute about parking the car in the wrong place (Kruerger, 2010).

The last decades, neighborhood mediation programs have become an increasingly popular method to deal with conflicts between neighbors, and to prevent such dramatic outcomes. The first neighborhood programs that used trained volunteers to mediate in neighbor conflicts were organized in the US in the 1970s. It is estimated that nowadays over 550 mediation programs have started in the USA alone (National Association for Conflict Management, NACM, 2010). Since the 1990s there have been similar developments in Europe (e.g. the UK, ADRNOW, 2010; The Netherlands, Fiers and Jansen, 2004).

While the practical success of neighborhood mediation programs is evident (e.g. Charkoudian, 2005; Ray, 1997; Fiers and Jansen, 2004), there is remarkably little research that focuses on the psychological and behavioral processes that may determine the course and outcomes of such programs. The current research aims to fill this void, and starts from the notion that a critical feature of many neighbor conflicts is that they are oftentimes asymmetrical in nature (cf. Pruitt, 1995; McGillicuddy *et al.*, 1991). That is, conflict is often defined as a situation in which an individual feels obstructed or irritated by another individual (Van de Vliert, 1997). Conflicts therefore are subjective, and conflict parties in the same conflict do not necessarily perceive an equal level of conflict. For instance, in case one neighbor gets irritated because he believes the music coming from his neighbor is too loud, but the other neighbor believes that he should be allowed to enjoy his music and does not see the problem. In line with this notion, conflict asymmetry is more recently introduced as a concept referring to the degree that one conflict party perceives more conflict than the other (Jehn and Chatman, 2000). Recent studies clearly show that whether a conflict is symmetrical or not substantially impacts the course, as well as the outcomes, of such interactions (e.g. De Dreu *et al.*, 2008; Jehn and Chatman, 2000; Jehn and Rispens, 2008; Jehn *et al.*, 2010; Jehn *et al.*, 2006; Kluwer and Mikula, 2002). In the current article, we will transfer the concept of conflict asymmetry to the context of neighborhood mediation programs, and propose that whether or not a conflict is asymmetrical, substantially influences the course of events.

Moreover, many neighborhood mediation programs start with a session in which the mediator has an intake with both parties separately. This is followed by a mediation session in which parties work towards a solution under the guidance of a third-party, only if both parties consent to it. Hence, the mediation session merely forms part of the total intervention. When investigating the effectiveness of such programs, it is thus important to focus on the entire neighborhood mediation program, including the intake as well as a mediation session. However, previous research primary concentrated on cases wherein mediation sessions actually took place (e.g. Alberts *et al.*, 2005; Jehn *et al.*, 2006; McGillicuddy *et al.*, 1991; Poitras, 2005, 2007;

Pruitt, 1995; Welton *et al.*, 1988; Zubek *et al.*, 1992). In the current study we focused on all cases that are signed-up for a Dutch neighborhood mediation program over the period of three years. Accordingly, we were able to examine the outcomes of the entire mediation process – from intake to follow-up. The results of this study are both practically as well as theoretically relevant because they give us a more refined and complete insight into the process and outcomes of neighborhood mediation programs and conflict asymmetry. More specifically, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating:

- that conflict cases at neighborhood mediation programs more often are asymmetrical than symmetrical;
- that asymmetry in perceptions is related to the degree of conflict escalation as well as the likelihood that a mediation session will take place; and
- that particularly for asymmetrical conflict cases, a mere intake session may already prove to be beneficial for mediation outcomes.

Neighborhood mediation

Mediation generally can be defined as an intervention in which conflict parties try to reach a solution voluntarily and autonomously with the support of a third-party (Pruitt and Carnevale, 1993). Traditionally, the support of third parties in mediation interventions has focused on the process. Over the years also more evaluative forms of mediation intervention have been developed, wherein a (often expert) third-party takes control over the outcomes, and may recommend potential solutions (Gabel, 2003; Zumeta, 2000). Whereas the last form of mediation mainly has been used in organization settings, neighborhood mediation programs typically employ more facilitative of transformative forms of mediation. As such, neighborhood mediators do not issue binding settlements. Instead, neighborhood mediation is aimed at restoring communication between conflict parties (Gewurz, 2001) and guiding conflict parties in their attempt to resolve a conflict (Sheppard, 1984). Specifically, such non-substantive interventions may focus on setting out procedures, ensuring that parties treat each other respectfully, and providing emotional help (Giebels and Yang, 2009).

Typically, neighborhood mediation programs use caucusing (Ray, 1997). That is, an intervention starts with an intake session with both parties separately and then, if both parties consent to it, a mediation session with both parties together is organized. The actual mediation session in mediation programs thus only forms one part of the whole intervention; the intervention starts when third parties enter an intake session with the conflict parties separately. Caucus sessions are ideal to create trust between the conflict parties and the mediator, and to obtain more detailed information about underlying motives and the perception of issues from each party individually (Welton *et al.*, 1988). In addition, caucus sessions give a mediator the opportunity to show sympathy and emotional support to a conflict party without appearing to be taking sides in the eyes of the other party (Welton *et al.*, 1988; Pruitt, 1995). Interestingly, because conflict is inherently stressful (Giebels and Janssen, 2005), and parties in these situations value emotional support and the opportunity to vent emotions (Giebels and Yang, 2009), a caucus session alone may already contribute to positive outcomes. Although many cases that are signed up for neighborhood mediation will not result in an actual mediation session, an intake-only intervention thus may already be beneficial for the

outcomes of neighborhood mediation. More specifically, we propose that whether or not an intake session alone leads to positive outcomes, depends on the level of conflict asymmetry.

Conflict asymmetry

Past research on social cognition and social information processing demonstrated that people often differ in their perceptions of the same reality (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Searle, 1997). Social conflicts form no exception to this rule; it may well be that one person perceives that a conflict exists, yet another person perceives that there is no, or less, conflict present. However, until recently, there have been only a few studies systematically investigating the psychological and behavioral consequences of asymmetrical versus symmetrical conflict perceptions of conflict parties (De Dreu *et al.*, 2008; Jehn and Rispens, 2008).

Although previous research on conflict asymmetry mainly focused on organizational team conflicts, Pruitt (1995) already touched upon the importance of asymmetry for the process and outcomes of neighborhood mediation. He found that the majority of neighborhood conflicts are about one party, the complainant, wanting the other party, the respondent, to change in some way. Conflicts with such a structure, in which one party wants to change but the other wants to maintain the status quo, are likely to reflect asymmetrical conflict perceptions (cf. De Dreu *et al.*, 2008). In line with this, research on neighbor conflicts found that complainants typically were more annoyed than respondents (McGillicuddy *et al.*, 1991). Such annoyance is likely to be fostered by the fact that a complainant perceives the other side ignoring that there is a problem altogether (e.g. Kluwer and Mikula, 2002). In the current study we therefore predict that neighbor conflicts that are reported to a mediation program are more often asymmetrical than symmetrical (*H1*).

Conflict asymmetry can have important consequences. For instance, in teams conflict asymmetry may have negative implications for group outcomes such as performance and creativity, because it leads to communication problems and ineffective discussions (De Dreu *et al.*, 2008; Jehn *et al.*, 2010; Jehn and Chatman, 2000). Furthermore, a distinction can be made between disputants that perceive more conflict and parties that perceive less conflict (Jehn and Rispens, 2008; Jehn *et al.*, 2010; Kluwer and Mikula, 2002). Parties that perceive less conflict are usually more satisfied and perform better, whereas disputants who perceive more conflict often feel disrespected and insecure, because their concerns are not heard (Tyler, 1999). As such, people who perceive more conflict than the other may start to question their view of the situation. In support of this reasoning, research on asymmetrical conflict structures in family settings showed that spouses who are challenging the status quo often are more dissatisfied with the relationship, and more depressed than those defending the status quo (Kluwer and Mikula, 2002). Generally, these processes may be explained by self-verification theory, which states that a belief that one's view of a situation and the desire for change is not shared and validated by others may cause discomfort and dissatisfaction (Swann, 1999).

In addition, symmetry in conflict perceptions may be positively related to conflict escalation. In escalated conflicts parties believe that their destructive behavior is merely a defensive reaction in response to the destructive behavior of the other – resulting in a vicious circle of destructive reactions and leading to openly escalated

situations (Mummendey and Otten, 1989; Rubin *et al.*, 1994). Whereas, in asymmetrical conflicts parties often show demand-withdraw type of interactions, in symmetrical conflicts parties have the tendency to reciprocate conflict behavior (Giebels and Taylor, 2009; De Dreu *et al.*, 2008; Kluwer and Mikula, 2002). Because of this tendency to reciprocate behavior in symmetrical conflicts it is more likely that parties come to a solution independently in symmetrical conflicts than asymmetrical conflicts – when acting constructively (De Dreu *et al.*, 2008). However, following the same reasoning, for symmetric cases in which parties act destructively – and are not able to find a solution themselves – reciprocation would mean that parties are more likely to end up in a spiral of reacting destructively to each other. In addition, conflict escalation in itself may lead to more symmetric conflict perceptions. That is, a neighbor conflict may start with one party perceiving conflict (the complainant being annoyed by the neighbor's barking dog) whereas the respondent does not (feels that the barking should not be a problem). However, over time, as the complainant keeps bothering the respondent, using more harsh tactics, and with new issues getting added to the conflict, the conflict may become more apparent for the respondent as well. Thus, over time conflicts that started asymmetrically, may escalate into more symmetric conflicts wherein both parties perceive equally high levels of conflict. For these two reasons we expect that, once parties call for help of a third party, symmetrical conflicts will be more escalated than asymmetrical conflicts (*H2*). As we will argue below, this difference in level of conflict escalation in symmetrical versus asymmetrical conflicts, may, in turn, have implications for the long-term outcomes of mediation interventions.

Mediation in asymmetrical conflicts

Until now, we only found one study investigating the relationship between conflict asymmetry and the effectiveness of third party mediation interventions (Jehn *et al.*, 2006). In this pioneering study on conflict asymmetry and mediation, Jehn and her colleagues found that when in conflict with a colleague at work, perceptions of conflict asymmetry inhibit the possibility for integrative conflict resolutions, and therefore impair the chance of successful mediation. However, this study only included cases in which a mediation session effectively took place. This may be an important limitation, because conflict asymmetry may directly be related to the likelihood that both parties voluntarily agree to participate in a mediation session. Past research demonstrated that, once participating in a mediation session, conflict parties are more likely to cooperate when they have the wish to reconcile and accept their share of responsibility (Poitras, 2005, 2007). However, in order to do this conflict parties first have to acknowledge that a problematic situation exists which needs to be solved. One therefore could argue that in conflict cases in which one party is experiencing less conflict – as is the case in asymmetrical conflicts – it will be less likely that both parties accept a share of responsibility for finding a conflict resolution. Additionally, if accepting one's responsibility is a necessary condition for parties to cooperate once in a mediation session, it will also be an important condition for a party's willingness to participate in a mediation session in the first place. Our third prediction therefore is that mediation sessions are less likely to take place in asymmetrical than in symmetrical conflicts (*H3*).

At first sight, *H3* might suggest that mediation programs are less effective in asymmetrical than in symmetrical conflicts. However, we do not think this is necessarily the case. That is, and as we postulated before, an important characteristic

of asymmetrical conflicts is that the conflict party that is experiencing more conflict than the other party, often feels diminished and disrespected because they feel they are ignored by the other side and not listened to (Jehn and Rispens, 2008; Jehn *et al.*, 2010). We also pointed out research that showed that an important aspect of a third-party intervention is that mediators acknowledge the problems and provides conflict parties with emotional support (Giebels and Yang, 2009). Furthermore, caucusing sessions with each party individually provide the ideal occasion for this (Welton *et al.*, 1988). Therefore, an intake session in which the complainant encounters understanding and emotional support from an outside party, may already prove beneficial because it verifies and validates one's viewpoint that there is a problem at hand (cf. Swann, 1999). Such an acknowledgement may be less important in symmetrical conflicts where parties both agree that a problem exists. In addition, because symmetrical conflicts often are more escalated, we expect that in these cases an intake-only intervention, in which parties are provided with emotional support and understanding, would not be sufficient to produce positive outcomes. We thus predict that asymmetrical conflicts differ from symmetrical conflicts in terms of the phase in which a neighborhood mediation program already contribute to solving neighbor disputes. More specifically, while a mediation session will generally promote positive outcomes – independent of conflict (a)symmetry (*H4a*) – we predict that in asymmetrical conflicts an intake-only intervention will already prove to be beneficial (*H4b*).

Method

Sample

We based our analyses on content codings produced from files of 261 neighborhood conflict cases handled by a neighborhood mediation project in a medium sized city in The Netherlands. As many other programs, this program is aimed at horizontal conflicts between residents living in the same neighborhood, and not at conflicts between residents and for instance landlords, tenants, and the local government. We gained access to the files of all cases reported to this project in the period from 2006 through 2008[1]. For each case that was signed up for neighborhood mediation in this period, a detailed and standardized file was kept and simultaneously updated during the complete course of the intervention.

The approximately 30 mediators involved in the program are all volunteers; residents who want to make a contribution to the quality of life in their city by helping others to solve their conflicts. Before starting as a mediator, volunteers follow an extensive training program consisting of various theoretical and role playing sessions, which is repeated annually. Like most neighborhood mediation projects, mediators are trained in interviewing skills to accurately capture the viewpoints of each party, and to intervene in conflicts in a non-substantive way (e.g. Ray, 1997). As a consequence, all mediators have the same standardized approach in which they aim to guide conflict parties to work towards a solution themselves, without issuing potential solutions themselves (Giebels and Yang, 2009).

A complete case of neighborhood mediation in the program consists of four phases: a complaint, the intake sessions with both parties separately, (the mediation session with both parties together, and a follow-up, four weeks later. A case starts with the coordinator getting in contact with the complainant, the resident that reported having a conflict with another resident. In this conversation the coordinator gets a brief

description of the complaint, and – if the case qualifies for neighborhood mediation (i.e. the case is about a horizontal conflict, has no other third parties involved, and has not escalated into physical violence) – explains the procedure and makes an appointment for an intake session. Two mediators who are then assigned to a case, visit the complainant for an intake session in which they listen to the parties' concerns and identify the issues at stake. Subsequently, the mediators visit the second party – the respondent – for an intake session. Next, if both parties consent to it, a mediation session with both parties at a neutral location is organized, with the guidance of the mediators. Finally, four weeks after either the intakes took place in cases with no mediation session, or else four weeks after the mediation session took place, both parties are contacted again to assess the current situation.

For each of the phases of a case a file was kept, describing in detail the history and process of each separate case using formatted sheets. The files were updated directly after each subsequent phase. That is, after the coordinator noted the complaint she started a new file for a case in which she gave a description of the parties that were involved, and the issues that were at stake as well as any other relevant information. Then, after the intake conversations, the mediators added a report of the intake sessions to the file. These reports contain specifics about the current situation as well as possibly new information about the history of a case. The same procedure was followed right after a mediation session. Finally, approximately four weeks after the last contact with the conflict parties, the parties were contacted by telephone, asking them a set of standardized questions about their evaluation of the current situation, and whether they signaled improvements due to the intervention.

Data for testing our hypotheses were retrieved from an extensive coding form that we developed to code all 261 files. This form included a total of 44 coding categories capturing a variety of aspects ranging from party demographics to conflict intervention outcomes. For testing our hypotheses, we focused our analyses on categorical and Likert-type scale codings of the number and type of conflict issues, the degree of conflict escalation, the degree of conflict asymmetry, and two types of outcomes: the extent to which the underlying issues were resolved, and the quality of the relationship between the parties.

Coding procedure

Two raters – unaware of the hypotheses – were trained to code the files. The outcome variables were coded separately from the other case information to limit problems of cross-fertilization. That is, the raters first read the information about the complaint and if available, both intake sessions and the mediation session. Based on this information the raters scored the type of issues and assessed the level of perceived conflict by both parties, as well as the degree of escalation. Then, the files were shuffled and raters received a second pile with information from all follow-ups and rated the outcomes of each case.

The development of the coding scheme and training of the raters took place in three subsequent steps. After we developed a first version of the coding scheme, both raters coded eight files which were selected on the condition that they were about intake plus mediation cases. These codings were compared and all items on which the raters disagreed were discussed and/or adapted. The files that we used for this training then were placed back, and we randomly selected 25 files which were rated by both raters

using the second version of the coding scheme. We again compared the codings for these 25 cases, and codings on which the raters disagreed were discussed, but the items or answers were not adapted. After this procedure, inter-rater reliability was sufficiently high to have one rater code all 261 files. Generally it is recommended that the reliability subsample should not be less than 50 units or 10 percent of the total sample (Neuendorf, 2002). In accordance, the second rater independently coded a random subsample of 75 cases (28 percent), (Cohen's κ s 0.71-0.87; Pearson's r s 0.61-0.97, all p -values < 0.001). We used the scores of the primary rater for the analyses.

Measures

Conflict asymmetry was coded in two separate ways, as a continuous score and a categorical score. We used the continuous score for analyses in which conflict asymmetry is a dependent variable, and the categorical score for analyses in which we compare symmetrical with asymmetrical cases. The continuous score for conflict asymmetry was based on the amount of conflict perceived by each individual party. This was assessed on the basis of the information about the intake session with each individual party. The questions were: "to what extent does the complainant (respondent) experiences the situation as a conflict situation?". The raters answered these two questions on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a great extent). We computed a continuous asymmetry score by subtracting the ratings for the respondents from the ratings for the complainants, resulting in a score ranging from 4 (complainant experiences more conflict than respondent) through 0 (parties experience an equal amount of conflict) to -4 (respondent experiences more conflict than the complainant). Additionally, and based on all available information in the complete file – the raters categorized a case in one of three categories: the complainant experiences more conflict than the respondent, both parties experience an equal amount of conflict, and the respondent experiences more conflict than the complainant[2]. An example of a typical case that was scored as asymmetrical is:

Party A is experiencing nuisance caused by the dog of party B, which is barking and howling the entire day [. . .] When speaking to Party B he reacts in a reserved way. [. . .] According to him there is no problem, his neighbor is exaggerating and there is nothing he can do about the problem.

To test the extent to which the categorical asymmetry score was related to the continuous asymmetry score we performed an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with the asymmetry categorization as factor and the continuous score as dependent variable. The results showed that in the cases that were categorized as asymmetrical the complainant indeed experienced significantly more conflict than the respondent ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.91$) than in cases categorized as symmetrical ($M = 0.04$, $SD = 0.29$), $F(1, 144) = 170.85$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.54$.

Degree of escalation was coded by assessing an increase in the number of issues, an increase in destructive behaviors between conflict parties, and the duration of a conflict (cf. Rubin *et al.*, 1994), based on the information about the intake session with both parties. The first two questions were: "to what extent has the number of issues in this case increased?", and "to what extent has parties' use of harsh tactics increased?". The raters answered these items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a great extent). The third question was "how long is this conflict already going on?", which was rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (short, weeks) to 5 (long, years).

We constructed a conflict escalation scale using these 3 items ($\alpha = 0.71$). A typical example of a case description that was scored as highly escalated is:

Ever since party B came living here 10 years ago, there were irritations back and forth. Things like leaving a car door opened in such a way that it blocked the other's entrance, or blocking the other's way by standing in the middle of the alley. Over the past years the situation has worsened. About 2 weeks ago things went out of control: Party B was blocking Party A, and the parties made verbal threats to each other.

For outcomes the final phase of a case was determined (i.e. did a mediation session take place and did the parties participate in the follow-up). Based on the information from the follow-ups, the raters then coded two types of outcomes: the extent to which the underlying issues were resolved, and the quality of the relation (cf. Pruitt, 1995). The extent to which issues were resolved was coded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a great extent). Relational quality was coded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely bad) to 5 (extremely good). An example of a case description with clearly positive outcomes in terms of both issues solved and quality of the relationship is:

Things are much better now, Party A and B say hi to each other on the street, and B is watching the dogs much more closely when they play in the garden.

An example of a description in which the relationship between parties improved to rather good, but the issues were not solved is:

They [the conflict parties] do greet each other on the street and they have developed a much better understanding. However, the complaints are still there. That is, party B does stop for a while [with hammering late at night] if A complains about the nuisance, but later he continues.

The exact number of cases per phase that were available for analyses are depicted in Figure 1, and see Table I for an overview of the scale means, standard deviations, and the inter-scale correlations.

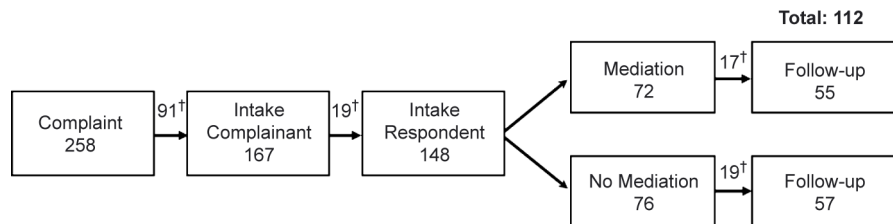


Figure 1.
Cases per phase that were available for analyses

Scale	1	2	3	4
1. Escalation	2.69 (0.96)	-0.23*	-0.11	-0.38*
2. Asymmetry		1.28 (1.14)	-0.08	0.18
3. Issues solved			3.43 (1.57)	0.74*
4. Relational quality				2.85 (1.04)

Table I.
Scale means, standard deviations and inter-scale correlations

Notes: Scale means, and standard deviations within parentheses, are represented in the cells on the table diagonal; * $p < 0.01$

Results

To check whether all cases indeed were about the typical neighbor-to-neighbor conflicts that we described before we first coded each case for type of issue. This was done by scoring the issues that were named by at least one conflict party as a cause for the conflict into separate categories. Conflict parties named between 1 and 6 issues per case ($M = 1.67$). All cases concerned scarce recourse types of conflict issues, most often nuisances about noise, unmaintained gardens and galleries, or nuisances caused by pets. In some cases, this was at some point accompanied by more personal or relational types of conflict (i.e. bullying and provocations), which can be considered a sign of escalation (cf. Simons and Peterson, 2000).

Asymmetrical neighbor conflicts

To test our first prediction that conflicts that are reported to neighborhood mediation are more often asymmetrical than symmetrical, we first tested whether indeed significantly more cases were classified as asymmetrical than symmetrical. In fact, a total of 101 cases (67 percent) were classified as a conflict in which the complainant experienced more conflict than the respondent, and 47 cases (31 percent) as a conflict in which both parties experienced an equal amount of conflict. A binomial test indicated that this distribution differed significantly from chance, $p(x = 101) < 0.001$. Furthermore, the mean for the continuous asymmetry score was 1.28 ($SD = 1.14$) and differed significantly from 0, $t(146) = 13.54$, $p < 0.001$. The results thus supported our first prediction that the conflicts that were handled by neighborhood mediation were more often about asymmetrical than symmetrical conflicts.

Next, we tested our second prediction that asymmetrical neighbor conflicts are less escalated than symmetrical conflicts. To this end, we performed an ANOVA analysis with the categorical conflict asymmetry measure as a factor (the complainant experiences more conflict than the respondent versus both parties experience an equal amount of conflict) and conflict escalation as a dependent variable. In line with our prediction, this analysis showed that asymmetrical conflicts were less escalated ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.78$) than symmetrical conflicts ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.95$), $F(1, 146) = 20.67$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.12$. In addition, the correlation between the continuous asymmetry score and conflict escalation was significantly negative, $r(146) = -0.28$, $p = 0.001$. These results provided support for our second hypothesis that asymmetrical conflicts are less escalated than symmetrical conflicts.

Asymmetry affecting the course of neighborhood mediation

Our third prediction was that mediation sessions less often take place in asymmetric conflicts than in symmetric conflicts. In fact, the data showed that a mediation session took place in 43 percent of the cases that were classified as asymmetric, versus 60 percent of the cases that were classified as symmetric. This difference was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 148) = 3.29$, $p(\text{one-sided}) = 0.035$. In addition, we performed a logistic regression with the continuous asymmetry score as predictor, and final phase (intake versus mediation) as dependent variable, while controlling for conflict escalation. The results showed that next to a significant relation for escalation, $b = -0.64$, $SE = 0.22$, $\chi^2(1, N = 146) = 8.38$, $p < 0.005$, conflict asymmetry was significantly related to the likelihood that a mediation took place, $b = -0.62$, $SE = 0.18$, $\chi^2(1, N = 146) = 12.73$, $p < 0.001$. These results therefore show, in support of our third prediction, that conflict

asymmetry was negatively related to the likelihood of mediation. Moreover this relation was independent of conflict escalation.

The effects of intake and mediation on outcomes

Finally, we investigated the effect of an intake-only versus an intake plus mediation session intervention on outcomes. We expected a positive effect of mediation on outcomes in general, independent of conflict (a)symmetry. In addition, we expected that the outcomes after an intake-only intervention would be more positive in asymmetrical conflicts than in symmetrical conflicts. To test these predictions, we performed two-way ANOVAs with conflict asymmetry (symmetrical versus asymmetrical) and final phase (intake versus mediation) as factors and issues solved and relational quality, respectively, as dependent variables.

When we look at issues solved as dependent variable, only the first part of our hypothesis was confirmed. That is, we found a significant main effect of mediation, $F(1, 108) = 11.11, p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.09$, showing that the extent to which issues were solved was higher in cases with a mediation session ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.35$) than in cases in which no mediation took place ($M = 2.85, SD = 1.63$). There was no significant difference between asymmetrical and symmetrical conflicts, $F(1, 108) < 0.01, p = 0.99$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$, and no significant interaction effect, $F(1, 108) = 0.01, p = 0.94$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$ (see Table II for an overview of the means and confidence intervals). We also tested whether this positive effect of mediation on issues solved would hold when controlling for conflict escalation. To do this, we performed an Analysis of Covariance with conflict asymmetry (symmetrical versus asymmetrical) and final phase (intake versus mediation) as factors, conflict escalation as covariant, and issues solved as dependent variable. When controlling for the relation between escalation and issues solved, $F(1, 107) = 0.07, p = 0.790$, partial $\eta^2 < 0.01$, the main effect of mediation remained significant, $F(1, 107) = 9.46, p = 0.003$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.08$, and the effect of asymmetry as well as the interaction effect remained non-significant, respectively $F(1, 107) = 0.11, p = 0.918$, partial $\eta^2 < 0.01$ and $F(1, 107) < 0.01, p = 0.969$, partial $\eta^2 < 0.01$. These results together suggest that while an intake session alone is not conducive to solving the underlying issues in a conflict, but that having a mediation session indeed positively contributes to resolving the conflict.

For relational quality as an outcome measure we found a dual main effect of mediation, $F(1, 104) = 18.58, p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.15$, and asymmetry, $F(1, 104) = 7.97, p = 0.006$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$. The interaction effect was not significant, $F(1, 104) = 1.27, p = 0.261$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$. We thus found a positive effect of mediation on the relational quality as an outcome as well. Moreover, the mean values supported our prediction that an intake-only may have beneficial effects in asymmetrical conflicts but not in symmetrical conflicts (see Table II). In order to test whether these differences were in line with our specific predictions we performed two additional analyses. First of all, we tested this hypothesis with a planned contrast, testing whether the relational outcomes in symmetrical conflicts with an intake-only differed significantly from symmetrical cases with mediation, asymmetrical cases with an intake-only, and asymmetrical cases with mediation intervention (3, -1, -1, -1). This contrast indeed was significant, $t(103) = -3.90, p < 0.001$, supporting our prediction that an intake already may contribute to more positive outcomes in terms of the quality of the relationship, in asymmetrical but not in symmetrical conflicts. In

Final phase	Type of conflict	Issue solved				Relational quality			
		M	SD	Lower level	Upper level	M	SD	Lower level	Upper level
Intake	Symmetrical	2.83	1.40	1.97	3.69	1.83	0.72	1.29	2.37
	Asymmetrical	2.86	1.70	2.41	3.32	2.64	0.98	2.36	2.93
Mediation	Symmetrical	3.94	1.39	3.24	4.67	2.94	1.09	2.52	3.38
	Asymmetrical	3.92	1.35	3.45	4.40	3.29	0.87	2.97	3.61

Notes: CI is confidence interval

Table II.
Outcomes of
neighborhood mediation

addition, as a more conservative test for our hypothesis, we conducted simple effect analyses. These results showed that there was no significant difference in relational quality between asymmetrical and symmetrical conflicts after a mediation session, $F(1, 104) = 1.63, p = 0.201$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$. However, the predicted difference between asymmetrical and symmetrical cases after an intake only intervention was significant, $F(1, 104) = 6.89, p = 0.010$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$. In asymmetric conflicts the outcomes, in terms of relational quality, were higher after an intake-only intervention than in symmetric conflicts. Our prediction that an intake session alone already can be beneficial for conflict outcomes in asymmetrical but not in symmetrical conflicts, was therefore supported. Taken together, our results suggest that although an intake-only intervention may improve the relation between conflict parties in asymmetrical conflicts, it does not necessarily contribute to solving the underlying issues. We will return to this point in the discussion.

Next, we tested whether this dual main effect of conflict phase and asymmetry could be explained by the fact that asymmetrical conflicts are less escalated than symmetrical conflicts. To do this, we performed an Analysis of Covariance with conflict asymmetry (symmetrical versus asymmetrical) and final phase (intake versus mediation) as factors, conflict escalation as covariant, and relational quality as dependent variable. When controlling for the relation between escalation and relational quality, $F(1, 104) = 7.44, p = 0.007$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$, the main effect of mediation remained significant, $F(1, 104) = 12.83, p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.11$. However, the main effect of asymmetry decreased to non-significant $F(1, 104) = 0.73, p = 0.146$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$. These results are in support of our argument that an intake-only intervention is not beneficial for symmetrical conflicts, because symmetrical conflicts often are more escalated.

Discussion

In the past decades, the practice of neighborhood mediation has widely spread in many industrialized countries (e.g. ADRNOW, 2010; Fiers and Jansen, 2004; NACM, 2010). Neighborhood mediation thus appears to be a successful intervention for neighbor-to-neighbor conflicts, and the data of the present research support this claim. In this study, we examined the outcomes of 261 conflict cases that were handled by a neighborhood mediation office over the period of three years. In general, we found that the outcomes of cases with a mediation session were more positively in terms of the extent to which issues were solved, as well as the quality of the relation between conflict parties, than cases with only an intake. Furthermore, in the majority of the conflicts reported to such a program parties had asymmetrical conflict perceptions. In line with previous research (e.g. Jehn *et al.*, 2006), our results demonstrated that conflict asymmetry may be an important determinant for the course as well as the outcomes of neighborhood mediation. That is, asymmetrical conflicts were less likely to lead to a mediation session than symmetrical conflicts. In addition, asymmetrical conflicts were less escalated than symmetrical conflicts. Finally, we found support for our prediction that an intake-only intervention already proves beneficial for asymmetrical conflicts but not for symmetrical conflicts.

Consequences of conflict asymmetry for outcomes of mediation

Most mediation interventions start with a session with both parties separately, and this is only followed by a mediation session if both parties consent to it. For mediators the

first challenge therefore is to convince both parties to participate in a mediation session. Our results showed that mediators are more often successful in this challenge when both the complainant and the respondent perceive (high levels of) conflict. These results are in line with previous studies that demonstrated that mediation is less effective when parties do not accept their share of responsibility (Poitras, 2005, 2007). Making both parties aware of the conflict and taking responsibility, therefore may not only be important for parties' cooperation once in a mediation session, but is already important to get both parties at the mediation table.

Moreover, we found that for asymmetrical conflicts an intake-only intervention already contributed to improving the relationships between conflict parties. Our reasoning was that providing emotional support is especially important for parties who experience more conflict in asymmetrical conflict situations (Jehn and Rispens, 2008; Jehn *et al.*, 2010). Sessions with conflict parties separately are the ideal situation for a third party to provide this type of support, without being afraid of appearing biased (Welton *et al.*, 1988). Mediators in neighborhood mediation projects can thus be an important source of support for conflict parties, also when just having an intake session.

In addition, one could argue that an intake session already has beneficial effects on conflict outcomes because having an intake session with the respondent makes the respondent aware of the issues the complainant has. In that case, respondents would alter his or her behavior and as a result one would expect to observe a decrease in perceived issues after an intake already. However, in the current study we only found evidence for improved relational outcomes and did not find evidence for a decrease in perceived issues after intake-only interventions in asymmetrical conflicts. Therefore, the current results suggest that the beneficial effects of intake-only interventions are driven by increased feelings of support for the complainant but not by increased awareness of the respondent. To test this line of reasoning more directly, future studies should explicitly measure (changes in) feelings of support of the complainant as well as awareness of complaints by the respondent.

Taking the results of both outcome measures together shows that, whereas in asymmetrical conflicts an intake-only intervention can lead to better relationships between conflict parties, it may not contribute to resolving the underlying issues that are at stake. This implies that conflict parties can become more tolerant toward each other because a third party gives them emotional support and acknowledgement, and they may therefore find it easier to accept the nuisances coming from their neighbors. Importantly, for the long-term success of neighborhood mediation, improving the relationship between conflict parties may actually be more important than solving the underlying issues (Pruitt, 1995). Conflict issues change over time, and as a result, agreements on how to solve the current issues may become irrelevant. Instead it is important that conflict parties feel that they can solve the issues that in the future may come up themselves – something which becomes more likely when the relation between conflict parties has been improved. The results may also suggest that empowerment of conflict parties is an important outcome of neighborhood mediation. An interesting question for future research therefore would be whether intake-only interventions already can lead to empowerment.

The current results in addition show that symmetrical conflicts were more escalated than asymmetrical conflicts. This is line with research showing that conflict parties

often show demand-withdraw type of interactions in asymmetrical conflicts, whereas in symmetrical conflicts parties tend to reciprocate each others' behavior (Giebels and Taylor, 2009; Kluwer and Mikula, 2002; De Dreu *et al.*, 2008). Because of a higher likelihood of reciprocation, constructively acting parties are more likely to come to a solution independently in symmetrical conflicts than in asymmetrical conflicts (De Dreu *et al.*, 2008). However, the current data suggest that cases in which both parties experience conflict, but in which the parties do not come to a solution themselves, run more risk of escalation. An additional explanation for the positive relation between conflict asymmetry and escalation may be that conflict escalation in itself leads to more symmetric conflict perceptions. Unfortunately, with the current data it is impossible to answer the question which of these reasonings explains this finding and more research is needed to unravel this question. In addition, while asymmetrical conflicts were less escalated, and therefore may be more easily dealt with by a third party, ironically they also were less prone to be mediated. Although we found that for asymmetrical conflicts an intake-only intervention may already be beneficial, this does points at the importance of convincing the respondent to consent to take part in a mediation session – especially when the conflict is asymmetrical.

Merits and limitations of the current study

For this study we analyzed the files of 261 cases that started within a mediation program in the time span of three years. These files contained very rich information about the conflict issues, experiences and behaviors of both conflict parties, and about the situation four weeks after the intervention. By analyzing these files we were able to examine the entire process of all types of conflicts that are typically reported to such a program. In contrast with previous research on neighborhood or community mediation we therefore did not have the problem of selection biases, and did not have to focus on only those cases in which the mediation effectively took place.

The original files were completed over time, as a case advanced through the different phases of the program, and we coded the phases separately in chronological order. We therefore feel save to conclude that conflict asymmetry indeed is affecting the course and outcomes of neighborhood mediation and not vice versa. Furthermore, we did not have to rely on short-term outcomes, such as perceived satisfaction and fairness of the mediator immediately after the intervention took place, because the outcomes were assessed four weeks after the intervention. By focusing on the quality of the relation between conflict parties and the extent to which issues were solved four weeks after the intervention, we gained a reliable idea of the long-term outcomes of the mediation program. However, it would be interesting for future research, to gather data over even a longer period, and as we indicated before, also to investigate how (former) conflict parties handle future conflicts.

Next to these advantages a limitation of the current approach is that the results are not based on perceptions of the conflict parties themselves, as was done previously by Jehn and colleagues (Jehn *et al.*, 2006, 2010; Jehn and Chatman, 2000), but on the observations made by third parties (the mediators and the coordinator). Because each case was handled by varying combinations of different mediators, problems due to systematic biases are not likely. Additionally, we can assume that the observations are reliable because three parties were involved in making these observations. Although the mediators and coordinator are trained in interviewing skills, and to accurately

capture the actual view and experiences of both conflict parties, future research should measure more directly if parties for instance feel more empowered after an intake-only intervention.

Practical implications and conclusion

The results of the present study indicate that mediators should be aware of the divergence of conflict perception between conflict parties because it is affecting the willingness of parties to participate in a mediation session. In the intake session with the respondent it therefore may be especially important to signal that there is a problematic situation, even if the party him- or herself does not initially see it like this.

This first implication is possibly already very much in line with what most mediators that are working for neighborhood mediation intuitively know and do in their daily practice. Our second implication may actually be less so. Namely, our results indicate that mediators, and also policy makers, should realize that the actual mediation session is only one part of the total intervention. That is, our results demonstrate that often a mere intake session may already prove beneficial for conflict outcomes. Mediators therefore should realize that even an intake session provides opportunities to promote positive conflict outcomes. In addition, for policy makers these results imply that the evaluation of mediation programs, and for instance a decision on the continuation of funding for such projects, should not merely be based on the number of mediation sessions that took place.

Notes

1. In total there were 278 files of cases reported to the program over the period of 2006-2008. However, for 20 cases the file described insufficient details to be coded.
2. Three cases were classified as cases in which the respondent experiences more conflict than the complainant. We omitted these three atypical cases from further analyses.

References

- ADRNOW (2010), "Community mediation", available at: www.adrnow.org.uk/go/SubPage_48.html
- Alberts, J.K., Heisterkamp, B.L. and McPhee, R.M. (2005), "Disputant perceptions of and satisfaction with a community mediation program", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 16, pp. 218-44.
- Charkoudian, L. (2005), "A quantitative analysis of the effectiveness of community mediation in decreasing repeat police calls for service", *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, Vol. 23, pp. 87-98.
- De Dreu, C., Kluwer, E. and Nauta, A. (2008), "The structure and management of conflict: fighting or defending the status quo", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, Vol. 11, pp. 331-53.
- Fiers, L.M.J. and Jansen, A. (2004), "Het succes van buurtbemiddeling. Resultaten van het evaluatieonderzoek (The success of neighborhood mediation. Results from the evaluation study)", available at: www.hetccv.nl/binaries/content/assets/ccv/dossiers/samenleven-en-wonen/buurtbemiddeling/succes_van_buurtbemiddeling.pdf
- Gabel, S. (2003), "Mediation and psychotherapy: two sides of the same coin", *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 19, pp. 315-28.
- Gewurz, I.G. (2001), "(Re) Designing mediation to address the nuances of power imbalance", *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, Vol. 19, pp. 135-61.

- Giebels, E. and Janssen, O. (2005), "Conflict stress and reduced wellbeing at work: the buffering effect of third-party help", *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 14, pp. 137-55.
- Giebels, E. and Taylor, P. (2009), "Interaction patterns in crisis negotiations: persuasive arguments and cultural differences", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 94, pp. 5-19.
- Giebels, E. and Yang, H. (2009), "Preferences for third-party help in workplace conflict: a cross-cultural comparison of Chinese and Dutch employees", *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, Vol. 2, pp. 344-62.
- Jehn, K.A. and Chatman, J.A. (2000), "The influence of proportional and perceptual conflict composition on team performance", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 11, pp. 56-73.
- Jehn, K.A. and Rispens, S. (2008), "Conflict in workgroups", in Cooper, C.L. and Barling, J. (Eds), *Handbook of Organizational Behavior*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 262-76.
- Jehn, K.A., Rispens, S. and Thatcher, S.M. (2010), "The effects of conflict asymmetry on workgroup and individual outcomes", *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 53, pp. 596-616.
- Jehn, K.A., Rupert, J. and Nauta, A. (2006), "The effects of conflict asymmetry on mediation outcomes: satisfaction, work motivation and absenteeism", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 17, pp. 96-109.
- Kluwer, E. and Mikula, G. (2002), "Gender-related inequalities in the division of family work in close relationships: a social psychological perspective", *European Review of Social Psychology*, Vol. 13, pp. 185-216.
- Kruenger, P. (2010), "Neighborhood feud turned fatal: deputies", *NBC San Diego*, available at: www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local-beat/Neighborhood-Fued-Turned-Fatal-Deputies-89997827.html
- Le Post (2009), "Quadruple meurtre du Raincy: 'C'est un drame du voisinage'", *Le Post*, available at: www.lepost.fr/article/2009/10/11/1736176_quadruple-meurtre-du-raincy-c-est-un-drame-du-voisinage.html
- McGillicuddy, N.B., Pruitt, D.G., Welton, G.L., Zubek, J.M. and Peirce, R.S. (1991), "Factors affecting the outcome of mediation: third-party and disputant behavior", in Duffy, K.G., Grosch, J.W. and Olczak, P.V. (Eds), *Community Mediation: A Handbook for Practitioners and Researchers*, Guilford Press, New York, NY, pp. 137-49.
- Mummendey, A. and Otten, S. (1989), "Perspective-specific differences in the evaluation of aggressive interaction sequences", *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 19, pp. 23-40.
- National Association for Conflict Management (2010), "Community mediation program statistics", available at: www.nafcm.org/pg5.cfm
- Neuendorf, K.A. (2002), *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Paquin, G. and Gambrill, E. (1994), "The problem with neighbors", *Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 22, pp. 21-32.
- Poitras, J. (2005), "A study of the emergence of cooperation in mediation", *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 21, pp. 281-300.
- Poitras, J. (2007), "The paradox of accepting one's share of responsibility in mediation", *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 23, pp. 267-82.
- Pruitt, D.G. (1995), "Process and outcome in community mediation", *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 11, pp. 365-77.

-
- Pruitt, D. and Carnevale, P. (1993), *Negotiation in Social Conflict*, Thomson Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., Belmont, CA.
- Ray, L. (1997), "Community mediation centers: delivering first-class services to low-income people for the past twenty years", *Mediation Quarterly*, Vol. 15, pp. 71-7.
- Rubin, J., Pruitt, D. and Kim, S. (1994), *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement*, 2nd ed., McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, NY.
- Salancik, G. and Pfeffer, J. (1978), "A social information processing approach to job attitudes and task design", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 23, pp. 224-53.
- Searle, J.R. (1997), "Replies to critics of the construction of social reality", *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 10, pp. 103-10.
- Sheppard, B.H. (1984), "Third party conflict intervention: a procedural framework", in Staw, B.M. and Cummings, L.L. (Eds), *Research in Organizational Behavior*, JAI Press, Greenwich, CT, pp. 141-90.
- Simons, T. and Peterson, R. (2000), "Task conflict and relationship conflict in top management teams: the pivotal role of intragroup trust", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 85, pp. 102-11.
- Swann, W.B. (1999), *Resilient Identities: Self, Relationships, and the Construction of Social Reality*, Basic Books, New York, NY.
- Tyler, T.R. (1999), "Why people cooperate with organizations: an identity based perspective", *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 21, pp. 201-46.
- Van de Vliert, E. (1997), *Complex Interpersonal Conflict Behaviour: Theoretical Frontiers*, Psychology Press, Hove.
- Welton, G.L., Pruitt, D.G. and McGillicuddy, N.B. (1988), "The role of caucusing in community mediation", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 32, pp. 181-202.
- Zubek, J.M., Pruitt, D.G., Peirce, R.S., McGillicuddy, N.B. and Syna, H. (1992), "Disputant and mediator behaviors affecting short-term success in mediation", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 36, pp. 546-72.
- Zumeta, Z. (2000), "A facilitative mediator responds", *Journal of Dispute Resolution*, Vol. 28, pp. 335-41.

Further reading

- Heavey, C.L., Layne, C. and Christensen, A. (1993), "Gender and conflict structure in marital interaction: a replication and extension", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 61, pp. 16-27.
- Pruitt, D., Parker, J. and Mikolic, J. (1997), "Escalation as a reaction to persistent annoyance", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 8, pp. 252-70.

Corresponding author

Elze G. Ufkes can be contacted at: elze.ufkes@yale.edu