

Mary Adams Trujillo, S. Y. Bowland, Linda James Myers, Phillip M. Richards, Beth Roy (eds): Re-centering culture and knowledge in conflict resolution practice
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The title of the book “*Re-Centering Culture and Knowledge in Conflict Resolution Practice*”, could hardly have been better chosen or more accurately predictive of what one finds inside. The editors tell us in the Introduction that they had three animating impulses for this collection: treating the experiences of conflict resolution practitioners as the basis for research; moving the center of knowledge production about conflict resolution from academia to the practice field; and highlighting culturally specific and enriched practices that may diverge from dominant assumptions. Of course, taken collectively these make an especially tall order, one unlikely to be filled fully and evenly by any anthology. Still, this creative collection delivers enough nuggets of insight to partly satisfy both the skeptic and the true-believer with regard to culture and knowledge in conflict resolution.

The conflict resolution field has reached a level of maturity such that debates about the roles that culture plays in conflict generation, in conflict-specific knowledge production, and in conflict resolution practices have been going on among scholars and practitioners alike for at least 20 years. There are far fewer skeptics nowadays than there once were about culture’s influences on conflict. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine anyone working in the field or teaching in the conflict resolution classroom today defending the position that even such an accomplished scholar as I. W. Zartman took in 1993. Commenting on the relevance of cultural dynamics in international negotiations in his contribution to an edited collection devoted to culture and negotiation, Zartman thought it helpful to opine that, “Culture is indeed relevant to the understanding of the negotiation process, every bit as relevant as the breakfast [the negotiators ate], and to much the same extent” (Quoted in Avruch (1998), p. 42). Thankfully, conflict resolution has come a long way since then, thanks in no small part to the work of Kevin Avruch, Peter Black, Beth Roy (one of the editors of the present collection), John Paul Lederach and others whose work on the ground in conflict settings and whose reflexive publications on that work have helped move cultural dynamics from the field’s periphery.

Still, significant dimensions of the problem remain, particularly with regard to conflict resolution practitioners and researchers of color. Often finding the dominant assumptions

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and approaches to conflict resolution training and practice so culturally bounded that it did not resonate with their own experiences or cultural traditions, the “Practitioners Research and Scholarship Institute” (PRASI) was founded in 2001 to address issues of race and diversity in the field of conflict resolution. The collection of essays and other contributions in *Re-Centering* is one outcome from the loose network of practitioners that is PRASI.

What we find here is a diversity of voices, perspectives, experiences, and skill-sets across the book’s chapters. Some are authored by practitioners, some by activists, some by community organizers, some by students, and still others by researchers and scholars. Even these wide-ranging categories are not sufficient as many individual authors self-identify in multiple categories. Some of the chapters are quite short (4–6 pages); some are presented in creative formats (e.g. interviews, transcribed multi-person dialogue sessions); some are more traditional case studies (e.g. peer mediation in multi-cultural schools); some are deeply personal reflections on how social problems like racism and sexism intersect with conflict resolution (e.g. a black mediator struggling to move from volunteering to vocation); and some explain culturally specific conflict resolution approaches (e.g. mediation from a Filipino perspective; conflict workshops within the context of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict and the legacies of colonialism in those workshops; environmental dispute resolution with Native American communities; Kenyan indigenous approaches to conflict resolution).

The book has three sections, with a short descriptive introduction by the editors to each section. The collection opens with six chapters that address the connections of culture and conflict. The middle section has seven chapters that privilege practice and experiential knowledge in research about conflict resolution. The third and final section of nine chapters distills lessons from conflict resolution practice done in what we might call non-traditional ways, mostly by people of color working in a wide variety of settings. The focus in this final section is on power dynamics, especially at the busy intersections of culture, legitimacy, and power.

In a book of 22 chapters, a reviewer can only single out a few. Dileepa Witharana’s careful, detailed, and insightful analysis of the conflict resolution workshops imported to Sri Lanka by the British NGO, Quaker Peace and Service, is particularly valuable. Those working and teaching about conflict know well the various competing interpretations lent to the terms most often used to name the field of practice and research: conflict management, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation. Witharana usefully applies this otherwise somewhat tired discussion to demonstrate—at the outset of his chapter—how much these various dominant approaches still manage to miss and therefore still have to learn. He argues that how we conceive of the *source* of conflict will impact our engagements with it. For example, the religion of the Sri Lankan Sinhalese majority, Theravadic Buddhism, understands both conflict and peace to be expressions of the internal states of individual persons. For conflict thus conceived, the western approaches of management and resolution hardly seem appropriate. Witharana points out that a “Buddhistic approach to peace is more in line with the *transcendence* of conflict than its *management, resolution or transformation*” (p. 196).

Having so usefully set the stage, Witharana then structures his essay around analyzing seven areas of tension he has witnessed in the importing of conflict resolution training to a conflict situation like Sri Lanka’s. They are: positive attitude versus critical analysis; facilitator versus trainer; workshop time versus informal discussions; career needs versus community peace needs; equity versus impact; agenda versus content; stereotypes and myths versus culture and social realities. In each case, Witharana insightfully reflects on his practice in the field, using concrete examples to demonstrate that these are not either/or

choices so much as different values or ways of doing and being that must be held in a respectful, creative tension.

Similarly, Lucy Moore focuses on two dilemmas she often faces as a mediator in natural resources disputes in the US west: the different epistemologies that disputants bring to the negotiating table (i.e. community and place-based knowledge of area residents versus scientific and laboratory-based knowledge of agencies like the US Environmental Protection Agency); and issues associated with the full inclusion of Native American parties in conflict resolution processes. Her distilled lessons on the latter provide a helpful check list, while her discussions on the former are an inspiring example of the empowerment potential of public sector dispute resolution processes.

Cherise D. Hairston's chapter reprises her alarming literature review article published a decade ago in one of the field's leading journals, *Mediation Quarterly* (now *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*). In that earlier article, she reviewed 420 articles published in *Mediation Quarterly* from 1983 through 1997. Her content analysis revealed zero articles "by, for or about people of African descent." Hairston argues that the intervening decade has brought little to no change insofar as the field is marked by diversity resistance—an "unwillingness to acknowledge and recognize the contributions of people with diverse backgrounds." Her analysis is sharp and clear, saying that this resistance is itself "firmly rooted in racism."

This chapter and many others highlight the tragic ironies involved in the conflict resolution field—of all fields—replicating and even propagating the larger social inequalities of race, class and gender. Conflict resolution is based in part not only on valuing all perspectives of all parties to a conflict, but on being attuned to power disparities and concerned about empowerment. This collection takes these principles to a different level: applying them to the field itself, an invaluable contribution.

In that regard, the chapter that is essentially a transcribed conference call conversation with Hasshan Batts and a handful of other practitioners of varying ethnicities, trainings, age, and experiences is particularly useful in its accessibility. Batts, a young African-American male who served on the staff of a community mediation center in North Carolina, engages his colleagues in an honest discussion of mediation as a tool of oppression and the many roles of white privilege in the conflict resolution arena. I have often assigned some of the interviews in Deborah Kolb's (1994) book, *When Talk Works: Profiles of Mediators*, as reading in my courses because they are personal, engaging, accessible, and provide a window into practice. Predictably and unfortunately, there is only one African-American mediator profiled in that earlier collection. Thus, I am eager to use the Batts dialogue in my courses for its diversity of viewpoints, its sensitivity to the nuances of inequalities, its refreshingly open and honest discussion of race and class, and its timely references to real issues and real debates currently consulting the field.

Re-Centering is published by Syracuse University Press as part of their series, Syracuse Studies on Peace and Conflict Resolution. Series editor Louis Kriesberg and his colleagues should be commended for an expansive view of the mission of a University Press. As with any project devoted to re-centering, this is a book that must be taken on its own terms. Bringing traditional expectations and evaluations to bear on it would be a disservice, would risk missing the points being made, and would ultimately be a form of resistance to the re-centering being attempted. Some might call this collection uneven, unscholarly, atheoretical, and maybe even undisciplined. Doing so would be unfair to what was intended, and to what has been delivered. The re-centering put forward by this collection is ultimately a

service to the conflict resolution field, providing hope that the field itself can experience the transformations it seeks to facilitate elsewhere.

References

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