

## Effective mediation in a rural community

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Although mediation is gaining considerable popularity on the African continent, very little research has been conducted into its nature and effectiveness. Even the most basic questions about mediation in rural communities remain largely unanswered. It has not been clearly determined: (a) what types of conflict can be mediated, (b) what responses occur in interpersonal conflict, (c) what solutions may be derived from mediation, and (d) whether there are differences in male-male, female-female, and male-female conflict. This study investigates these issues.

### Effektiewe mediasie in 'n landelike gemeenskap

Alhoewel mediasie tans meer onder die soeklig kom, is daar weinig navorsing oor die aard en effektiwiteit van mediasie in Afrika onderneem. Selfs die mees basiese vrae oor mediasie in landelike gemeenskappe bly onbeantwoord. Daar is nog nie duidelikheid verkry oor (a) die werklikheid van mediasie in bepaalde tipes konflik, (b) watter response verwag kan word in interpersoonlike konflik, (c) watter oplossings mediasie bied en (d) of daar 'n verskil is in konflik tussen mans, tussen vrouens en tussen mans en vrouens. Die doel van hierdie studie is om hierdie aspekte te ondersoek.

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South Africans live in one of the most violent societies in the world, a society in which life is worth less than property (Bisetty 1999: 12). Destructively managed conflict leads increasingly to physical and verbal violence. It is difficult to guarantee safety and an orderly living environment. Non-governmental organisations and multi-purpose community centres have been implementing mediation in communities, directly involving volunteers in the reduction of violent conflict (Douwes *et al* 1995: 7). These volunteers are trained in mediation procedures and make themselves available to the communities.

### 1. The theoretical context

Every day people experience conflict situations ranging from minor discomfort to serious confrontations.<sup>1</sup> South Africa is increasingly affected by violence,<sup>2</sup> and South Africans live in a culture of violence, a society in which it is assumed that aggressive behaviour and violence are acceptable ways of resolving conflict. Violent conflict creates personal and institutional problems that are all too familiar — anger, fear, retaliation, bloodshed and death. A community consumed by violence finds itself unable to grow, to attract and sustain business enterprises, to draw visitors, and eventually unable to prevent its own members from moving away. All too aware of physical violence, people sometimes fail to recognise emotional violence — bullying, disruptive behaviour, lack of respect, belittling, labelling, threats, exclusion and injustice — all of which damage relationships.

People may recognise the need for alternatives to violence but often lack knowledge and training in pursuing alternatives which

- 1 Conflict is defined as a discord of needs, drives, wishes, and/or demands. Intrapersonal conflict involves an internal discord, whereas interpersonal conflict involves discord between two parties, and intergroup conflict refers to discord within a group or groups of people. Each of these types of conflict impacts on communities (Schrumpf *et al* 1997: 15).
- 2 Violence is defined as behaviour by persons against persons that threatens, attempts, or inflicts physical or emotional harm. Although physical violence captures the attention and mobilises concern and outrage, the predominance of more subtle psychological violence may well be the more significant factor encountered in efforts to combat violence (Gullotta & McElhaney 1999: 6).

would not only reduce violence, but also promote a just society in which people could live together in peace. Violence is learned behaviour and its alternatives must also be learned. Individuals need support from others and from institutions in society if they are to learn to apply peaceful strategies for the greatest benefit. This support is often lacking. Knowledge, skills and the motivation to pursue peaceful strategies for solving personal and community problems are essential if the current epidemic of violence is to be eradicated.

Mediation<sup>3</sup> has emerged as one of the most widely used types of conflict resolution. Mediation training programmes come in a variety of forms but generally tend to follow the “cadre approach”, in which small groups of participants are trained to serve as mediators. The Mediation Training Programme developed by the staff of the Centre for Peace Education at the University of South Africa is an example of the cadre approach. In this study the focus is on the implementation of this approach, using mediators to mediate interpersonal conflict in a rural, culturally diverse community.

This study investigates four questions:

- What type of conflict was referred to conflict managers?

Conflict may be classified in several ways. Deutsch (1973), in a theoretical typology, differentiated between conflict based on control over resources, and differences in preferences, values, beliefs or goals for relationships (Anstey 1993: 13-8). Despite the availability of such theoretical typologies, however, there is scant documentation of the nature and frequency of actual conflict in natural settings (such as rural communities) and the few studies that have been conducted have not related their findings to the theoretical writings on conflict. Araki (1990) found that most conflict in rural communities related to harassment in the form of verbal threats. Other frequent forms of conflict included gossip and rumours, interpersonal disagreements and misunderstandings, broken friendships, belittling and insults, access or possession

- 3 Mediation is a process by which disputants explore mutually satisfactory solutions to differences or arrive at a common agreement or plan by means of the facilitation of a third party. It is a problem-solving process in which the two parties in the dispute meet face-to-face to work together, assisted by a neutral third party, called the mediator, to resolve the dispute (Okumu 1995: 2).

conflict, and invasion of privacy. However, data on the conflict brought by members of rural communities to conflict managers to be mediated is sparse.

- What strategies did community members use to resolve their conflict?

The conflict strategies theory postulates that participants in conflict typically have two concerns — to achieve their goals and to maintain a good relationship with the other party (Johnson & Johnson 1994; Johnson & Johnson 1991). When those two concerns are considered in combination, five conflict strategies result: withdrawing, forcing, smoothing, compromising, and negotiating. It is not known which of these responses will be used to resolve interpersonal conflict.

- What agreements resulted from mediation?

Almost nothing is known about the nature of the settlements arrived at by means of mediation in rural communities. There is some data on outcomes when mediation was not used. DeCecco & Richards (1974) found that more than 90% of community disputes remained unresolved or were resolved in destructive ways. Given the destructive outcome of many incidents of interpersonal conflict, one may wonder whether mediation actually results in more constructive resolutions. The results of this study will hopefully shed some light on this issue.

- Do male-male, female-female, and male-female conflicts differ in type, strategy or mediated resolution?

Little is known about these issues and further research is needed.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

The study was conducted in a rural community in the Northwest Province. The community is a semiformal settlement. It is generally underdeveloped and lacking in infrastructure and social services. Unemployment and illiteracy are rife. There is a high incidence of crime,

violence and structural violence.<sup>4</sup> A cadre of 22 mediators consisting of service providers from social welfare (4), the local civic structure (6), the youth centre (8), and the child protection unit (4) was trained to mediate in pairs.

Most of the parties participating in the mediation process had been involved in community disputes. Their socio-economic status was low. Poverty represents a major threat to many households. In most cases the conflict is exacerbated by social and family disruption as a consequence of migrant labour, and by the low status of women in their society and relationships. Whole families have to share households where there is no privacy or space. Often families do not share responsibilities which simply devolve upon the women.

Conflict often encompassed relational disputes encountered within the community and social sphere, thus causing neighbourly and family disputes, as well as quarrels between friends. Common complaints included noisy neighbours, minor harassments, petty thefts and cross-cultural confrontations.

## 2.2 Procedure

Twenty-two service providers volunteered to become mediators and were trained during a five-day workshop based on the UNISA Centre for Peace Education's procedures.<sup>5</sup> Mediators were taught basic communication skills ("I"-messages, active listening, reflection of feelings), assertiveness skills and mediation skills (through procedures such as role play).

4 Structural violence refers to harm resulting from the inflexibility and rigidity of the rules of the structure in dealing with differences. Robert Gilman (1983: 8) defines structural violence as damage to an individual or group occurring due to an unequal distribution of resources (or access to them) in a given society.

5 During a mediation session, the mediator follows a prescribed procedure. He or she is thus able to tailor that procedure to fit individual circumstances by deciding how to allocate time to a person or a particular issue and by determining what questions to ask in order to elicit information. These decisions taken within the framework of the mediation process direct its flow. The mediator's role is to monitor the communication between disputants constantly and vigilantly in order to maintain a balanced exchange (Ngcongco 1995: 7).

During the twelve-month period of the investigation, the mediators were assigned to work in pairs on each conflict. For each conflict, the mediators completed a mediation report form. Mediators were on duty during the lunch hour, but mediation could also be arranged at other times during the day if conflict required immediate intervention. Individuals could request help from the mediators or be referred by the community police forum, counsellors, teachers, ministers, youth workers or government officials. Mediators were given a weekly schedule detailing their duty roster. The mediation programme operated for the entire twelve months.

### 2.3 Mediation report forms

An important aspect of this study is the accuracy with which the mediation report forms were completed. In the preliminary training workshop, mediators were trained for this, and ongoing training was provided by the facilitator throughout the twelve-month period on a weekly basis after an evaluation of the completed forms, ensuring that mediators understood how to complete the report forms, answering any questions and offering support. Special attention was given to any mediator experiencing difficulties.

### 2.4 Data collection

Data was collected on the types of conflict, the strategies used to resolve it, agreements derived by means of mediation, and the gender of the disputants. The mediators recorded the data. Every time they intervened, they completed a mediator report form, indicating the following information: date, the names of the mediators, the names of the individuals involved in the conflict, who referred them for mediation, the type of conflict, the strategies used, whether the conflict was resolved and, if so, the solution agreed upon.

The information contained in the mediator report forms was categorised according to the type of conflict reported, the strategies used, and the outcome or solutions agreed upon. For each of these categories, the conflict managers indicated whether the conflict was male-male, female-female, or male-female conflict. In most cases, two classification systems were used to analyse individuals' responses. A theoretical system related the findings to the theoretical literature

on conflict. A system derived from content analysis recorded the language used by individuals (participants) in describing conflict. Individuals' responses were classified into categories for each system.

The content analysis procedure consisted of five phases. First, all mediation report forms were studied to provide orientation in terms of the content. Secondly, each form was re-read in order to categorise the responses. Thirdly, related categories were combined into more generic categories. Fourthly, once the categories had been determined, the raters reread each form and classified the responses into the appropriate categories. Finally, the categories were placed on a continuum ranging from most destructive to most constructive. This procedure had been used in earlier studies (Johnson *et al* 1992).

Two classification systems were used to determine the types of conflict. The first was Deutsch's (1973) theoretical typology of conflict, relating to control of resources, preferences, values, beliefs, or the nature of the relationship between the individuals involved. The second system, derived from content analysis of the participants' descriptions, classified conflicts into aggression/fights, insults/belittling/rumours, possession/access conflict, conflict relating to preferences/values/beliefs ("what I prefer, what I believe is fact, what I think should be"), and conflict over work.

The conflict resolution strategies reported by participants were also categorised in terms of theoretical and content-analysis systems. The theoretical classification comprised five strategies (forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising and negotiating), as specified by the conflict strategies theory (Johnson & Johnson 1994). The content analysis resulted in four categories: physical force, verbal force, withdrawal, and reporting. These strategies were placed on a continuum ranging from most destructive (physical force) to least destructive (reporting).

To classify the resolution of the conflict a content analysis procedure was used, resulting in the following categories: no resolution, avoidance, forgiveness and apology, and fully negotiated mutual agreement. These solutions were placed on a continuum ranging from most destructive (no resolution) to most constructive (negotiated agreement).

All responses were independently coded by two trained coders, both academics. A 97% agreement level was recorded.

## 2.5 Data analyses

The analyses compared male-male, female-female, and male-female conflict in terms of the types of conflict, the strategies used and the solutions arrived at. Frequencies and percentages have been reported for all categories.

## 3. Results

The total number of conflicts reported over the twelve-month period was 161, involving 114 people. Of the disputes, 86 were male-male, 70 female-female and only five male-female. Of the 22 conflict managers, 14 mediated most of the conflict while eight mediated fewer than six disputes. Only 3% of the conflict was brought to the conflict managers by the individuals involved. Most incidents were referred for mediation by others.

The types of conflict were classified in two ways: a content analysis of Deutsch's theoretical system (see Table 1). The majority of conflicts (84%) involved physical fights and verbal insults. When Deutsch's categories were applied, the majority of conflicts involved relationship issues (86%). These data indicate that there were frequent relationship problems among members of the community, resulting in physical aggression and frequent insults and rumours.

Classification of strategies according to content analysis revealed that 92% of the conflict manifested itself as physical and verbal force (see Table 2). In terms of the theoretical categories, the majority of conflict was resolved through forcing (98%).

The solutions derived from mediation are classified in Table 3. The conflict managers successfully mediated 96% of the disputes. The majority of solutions depended on agreements to avoid each other (86%). There were a few apologies but no integrative agreements were negotiated by disputants. In the study, 86 of the disputes were between males, 70 between females and five between males and females. The same types of conflict was found among all gender combi-



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Table 1: Types of conflict: Gender comparison

Category	Male-Male		Female-Female		Male-Female		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Content analysis								
Physical aggression	39	45	27	39	2	40	68	42
Insults	32	37	34	49	1	20	67	42
Possession/ access	10	12	6	8	1	20	17	11
Preferences	5	6	3	4	1	20	9	5
Work	0		0		0		0	
Total	86	100%	70	100%	5	100%	161	100%
Theoretical analysis								
Control of resources	8	9	4	6	1	20	13	8
Preferences	1	1	0		0		1	1
Values	3	3	2	3	1	20	6	4
Beliefs	1	1	1	1	0		2	1
Relationships	73	86	63	90	3	60	139	86
Total	86	100%	70	100%	5	100%	161	100%

Table 2: Strategies used to resolve conflict: gender comparison

Category	Male-Male		Female-Female		Male-Female		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Content analysis								
Physical force	36	42	27	39	2	40	65	40
Verbal force	42	49	40	57	2	40	84	52
Withdrawal	5	6	2	3	1	20	8	5
Reporting	3	3	1	1	0		4	3
Total	86	100%	70	100%	5	100%	161	100%
Theoretical analysis								
Forcing	84	98	69	99	5	100	158	98
Withdrawing	2	2	1	1	0		3	2
Smoothing	0		0		0		0	
Compromising	0		0		0		0	
Negotiating	0		0		0		0	
Total	86	100%	70	100%	5	100%	161	100%

Table 3: Solutions to conflict

Category	Male-Male		Female-Female		Male-Female		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
No resolution	4	5	3	4	0		7	4
Avoidance	75	87	60	86	4	80	139	86
Forgiveness/apology	7	8	7	10	1	20	15	10
Negotiated agreement	0		0		0		0	
Total	86	100%	70	100%	5	100%	161	100%

nations. There were no significant differences between conflict strategies or solutions in terms of gender.

#### 4. Discussion

Although mediation programmes are enthusiastically endorsed in many communities, there is limited data on their actual use, particularly in rural communities in South Africa where ethnically diverse populations live in poverty in the midst of violence. The present investigation is one of the first studies on mediation conducted in a rural South African community involving subjects from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Very little is known about the nature and frequency of the conflict actually occurring in such communities.

During the twelve months of the study, 161 conflict encounters were mediated by the conflict managers after referral by counsellors, community policing officers, or ministers of religion, rather than by the disputants involved.

The disputants had a stable and predictable pattern of dealing with conflict: aggression, counter-aggression, mediation and withdrawal. Conflicts brought to mediation originated primarily in relationship problems characterised by physical and verbal aggression.

It is possible that the frequency of physical aggression found in this study may have been caused by socio-economic circumstances and related to substance abuse in many of the cases reported in this rural area. Further research is needed to clarify this issue.

Once attacked, disputants often responded in kind, using physical and verbal force as their strategy of choice in resolving the conflict. After such attempts at forcing the other person involved to concede,

disputants referred to mediation ultimately agreed to avoid each other in the future. Maintaining a good relationship with the other person did not seem to be an option.

## 5. Recommendations for further research

Researchers in this field would provide invaluable new insights if they focused on why avoidance is perceived as an acceptable and perhaps even desirable approach to conflict resolution. Many hypotheses could be proposed, such as: (1) the disputants do not know that other types of agreements are an option; (2) the dynamics of the situation are of such a nature that neither disputant is able to act in a non-aggressive way; (3) creative problem-solving requires the derivation of integrative agreements that may be beyond the cognitive repertoire or capacity of the disputants. It is hoped that future research may provide an unambiguous answer to this question.

Whatever the reasons, more thorough investigation of the pattern of aggression, counter-aggression, mediation, and withdrawal which came to light in this study would be invaluable.

No conclusive information exists as to whether male-male, female-female, and male-female conflicts differ in terms of type, strategy, or mediated resolution. This could also prove to be a valid and rewarding topic for further research.

## 6. Conclusion

Mediation programmes have been instrumental in improving conflict management in rural communities in a number of areas, indicating that there is a need for such programmes in these South African communities. In addition, there is a need for programmes to train people in a repertoire of possible strategies for coping with conflict management and attaining agreement (Briggs 1996: 60-3). Mediation programmes may be said to have achieved their purpose to the extent that their conflict resolution is successful.

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