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Challenging discourses on violence: from the personal to the political

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All human beings are implicated in the generation of violent human conflict. Conflict, as we know, is a product of social interaction and violent conflict is fuelled by the institutionalisation of difference. Social conflict at both micro and macro levels can be constitutively defined in terms of inclusion and exclusion. Violent conflict in schools, and war at an international level, involve a divisive process whereby parties 'dig in' to their respective positions (which tend to harden as the conflict escalates) and construct the 'other' as the 'enemy'. A normative discourse develops which justifies such formations, valorising the cause of one side and denigrating the cause of the other. Currently, binary discourses such as these are dominant at many levels in our global society, threatening our safety and our survival.

Discourse (that is the way we speak about things such as conflict or war) is a powerful force in determining our realities or 'truths', or whose 'truths' count in particular contexts. Dominant discourses are culturally bound and serve to construct the way we view the world. There are many 'truths', but these tend to be embedded in the implicit and explicit rules of various governments, societies, communities, families and dominant groups in schools. Powerful groups or individuals control who can and cannot speak, what can and cannot be spoken about, how and in what contexts, and thereby what we can and cannot hear. It is my intention in this paper to deconstruct some of the dominant discourses on violence that we have come to accept at micro- and macro- levels in our global society and to highlight how we, as mediators, can collectively play a powerful role in challenging these discourses - at micro-levels in our homes, workplaces and schools and at macro levels in our various national and global institutions.

Violent conflict, whether it is in the school or in the broader international arena, can only be understood within a wider understanding of human action. Violent conflict is both a product and a constitutive part of the relationship between individuals and broader societal structures. Currently our focus tends to be on the *management* and *regulation* of interpersonal violence and war, which we have normalised or accepted as inevitable, rather than on its total *elimination*. This serves to *legitimate* violence and, in some situations, to justify it by labelling it as "just", "normal", "natural", "humane", or as a "necessary evil". We now have new vocabulary which captures this – "the new normals".

Mediation is not a uniform activity – there are many models and approaches which traverse many domains. However we possibly would all agree that mediation is a practice which provides us with an opportunity to make a difference to the way people handle conflicts, within given cultural and structural constraints. Most

approaches to mediation generate a move away from violent confrontation towards mutual recognition and understanding. In general, the goal is for the mediator to recognize and enhance the transformative capacity of individuals, groups and communities and where possible foster tolerance and acceptance of difference between parties to a conflict, in a climate of respect and openness, so they can deal with their conflicts constructively and peacefully co-exist. Much of the mediation literature and research to date, however, focuses on mediator qualities, mediation techniques (such as reframing), the recognition and management of imbalances of power, negotiation and decision-making processes and the effectiveness of different types of intervention. It tends not to address or question the nature of conflict itself, or the institutions that support it.

The emphasis in earlier models of mediation was on the resolution of conflict through problem-solving and in later models (eg. transformative and narrative) the emphasis has shifted to the transformative nature of the process. The literature and practices however, rarely challenge the dominant discourses on violence or the institutional legitimation of violent conflict, nor question the cultural embeddedness of the mediator. For mediation to be useful, our theories and practices must be critical and self-reflexive and question societal assumptions and views of conflict in ways that enhance creativity and change.

The legitimation of violence, such as in global warfare and in schools, is situated in discursive practices based on exclusionist identities and a hierarchical construct which legitimates some voices and subordinates or marginalises others. Peace is a counter-discourse which seeks to understand the legitimation of violence and to challenge the discursive and institutional structures and frameworks which allow for its emergence. Militarism, for example, is a constant presence which renders war a desirable and feasible option in times of conflict. In addition, hegemonic patriarchal discourses continue to underpin and normalise violence in our homes, workplaces and schools. In Australia these discourses privilege the voices of Western, white, heterosexual, 'macho' males - a phenomena which is also evident in the current global crisis involving Iraq.

Mediators need to generate a critical discourse on peace and situate it within the mediation discourse if we are to really make a long-lasting difference in our conflicted world. In short, our construct of peace in the schoolyard and in the United Nations must incorporate and value differences and pluralities of identity, recognise and address the cultural and situational embeddedness of the mediator, and deconstruct and challenge discourses on violence and their institutional underpinnings.

Presenter's brief biography

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1. Director of the Conflict Management Research Group, University of South Australia (UniSA).
2. Director, Postgraduate Studies, Social Work & Social Policy, UniSA.
3. Program Director: Graduate Certificate in Mediation, Graduate Diploma in Mediation, Master of Conflict Management and the Professional Doctorate in Human Service Research, UniSA.

Acting President: World Mediation Forum (June 2001-May 2003).

President: Asia Pacific Mediation Forum (November 2001 – November 2003).

Chairperson, South Australian Dispute Resolution Association - SADRA (1988-1999).

4. Convened and chaired many mediation conferences including the first Australian National Mediation Conference (1993), the Second International Mediation Conference (1996) and the inaugural Asia Pacific Mediation Forum conference (2001).

Published chapters in books and many articles in refereed journals including the *Australian Dispute Resolution Journal*, *Children Australia*, the *Australian Journal of Social Work*, the *Australian Journal of Family Law*, the *Mediation Quarterly* and the *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*.

Chief researcher for numerous research projects including in the areas of:

- conflict in schools

- the experiences and needs of women, children and men in relation to domestic violence

- the use of puppets and workbooks with children who have witnessed domestic violence

- conflict involving children and families in transition

- verbal abuse and the construction of gendered identities in adolescence

- drama-in-education and conflict handling in adolescence

- mediation involving older persons and their families.

Since 1984 has conducted extensive and numerous mediation training programs in all States of Australia and in the UK, Sweden, Italy and the Philippines.

Inaugural Chairperson and continuing member of the *Family Services Council* (1994-1998) and member of the *Family Law Council* (1995-1998) - both advisory to the Australian Commonwealth Attorney-General. Member of the *National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse* (1997-2000), advisory to the Australian Minister for Family Services.