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Sean Byrne, Thomas Matyók, Imani Michelle Scott, Jessica Senehi

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Patrick G. Coy, Landon E. Hancock, Anuj Gurung

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Peace studies and conflict resolution describe an inter-related set of theories and practices, stemming from political science, international relations, labor relations, communication studies, and sociology. What binds this into a coherent whole is the commitment to addressing problems resulting from destructive conflict processes at various levels ranging from the individual to the structural (cf. Deutsch, 1973).

This primary principle of addressing problems has led to many studies on the ethics of intervention practice. Authors such as Laue and Cormick (1978), Anderson (1999), Fast et al. (2002) and Neufeldt (2014) have argued that interveners need to address issues of social justice underlying conflicts, while attending to power differentials between parties, and critically examining their own power as interveners. This broader understanding leads to the two key principles that contribute to effective conflict resolution practice at all levels: a commitment to social justice to secure stable resolutions to conflict; and the principle of empowerment for parties to generate and implement solutions for conflicts.

The dual commitment to social justice and to empowerment

An uneasy tension has long existed in the peace and conflict studies field between two values: the resolution of conflicts and the achievement of social justice (Gawerc, 2006). The tension is rooted in the fact that prioritizing the former has too often frozen structurally rooted injustices, sowing the seeds for future spin-off conflicts. As the field has developed and matured we have discovered that a constructive engagement and a creative tension between conflict resolution and peace with justice has often been the best our field could hope for. We now also know that, given the complexities of social conflicts, achieving that creative tension is a laudable outcome, not a mere consolation prize.

The practice of conflict resolution is similar in some respects to the practice of medicine (Kriesberg, 1999). A doctor cannot only facilitate healing, cures, and recovery. With a poorly timed intervention, a mistaken diagnosis, or a faulty prescription the patient’s condition can worsen exponentially. Conflict interveners face similar risks, which is why the professional mandate to “do no harm” is a widely accepted principle in medicine as well as conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Anderson, 1999). One critical aspect of doing no harm includes not entrenching power differentials that disadvantage already marginalized parties. For Laue and Cormick the central question was crystal clear: “Does the intervention contribute to the ability
of relatively powerless individuals and groups in the situation to determine their own destinies to the greatest extent possible” (1978, p. 217)? Similarly, for Gandhi the aim of conflict engagement was not to reach a resolution so much as for the parties to achieve dignity and self-realization (Weber, 1991, 2001). Adam Curle’s social conflicts progression model aims for “sustainable peace” as the outcome, i.e., where structural injustices are mitigated if not removed and conflict parties may reach their fullest human potential (Clark & Coy, 2015). Put another way, agency, self-determination, and being able to freely choose one’s own destiny – particularly for traditionally disadvantaged parties – are central ethical concerns in all conflict resolution practices (Hancock, 2016; Hedeen, 2004).

For interveners, this is the difference between aiming for the illusory goal of being an impartial neutral (see Mayer, 2004) and shouldering the realistic yoke of fair-minded advocacy. Even the attempt to strive for impartial neutrality can easily result in weaker parties being co-opted into processes and agreements that do not accord with their genuine interests (Modavi, 1996). This is why Quaker mediators often aim for a “balanced partiality” (Williams & Williams, 1994) that helps ensure all parties’ voices are heard, engaged with, and even heeded.

Empowerment is often a necessary component of advocacy on behalf of sustainable peace. Empowerment helps create conditions where people can develop critical perspectives, gain control over their lives, and become co-equal participants in their relationships, communities, and networks. For practitioners, sometimes this means providing various kinds of resources to those parties most in need, such as providing conflict coaching (Jones & Brinkert, 2008), co-developing conflict maps (Wehr, 1979), or drawing conflict trees (Fisher et al., 2000). These tools aid the development of the critical consciousness that is so foundational to empowerment (Freire, 1990).

Ethos of empowerment is particularly salient in family and divorce mediation. In the early years of both community and court-referred mediation, a feminist critique quickly emerged. It recognized that women seldom achieved equal bargaining power in mediations relative to men; as a result, the equitable outcomes valued by the mediation field too rarely occurred. In response, mediation theorists, trainers, and practitioners alike promoted and adopted tactics to empower women in family and divorce mediations and level the negotiating table. This often had positive outcomes with regard to the one-time and permanent division of property and assets, where ongoing power differentials become less relevant. But when it came to joint child custody arrangements women could be permanently disadvantaged. The power imbalances may have been temporarily redressed through conflict coaching and advocacy during mediation. But they quickly reappeared upon the return to everyday life, where ongoing child care issues are negotiated and renegotiated constantly between divorced partners still living their lives inside patriarchal systems, albeit separately (Regehr, 1994).

This single example demonstrates the quite dangerous three-way intersection between conflict resolution theory, ethics, and practice. There are often competing interests, values, and principles at play in any conflict resolution process, during both the intervention process and with regard to the long-term consequences of agreements. In this sense, true empowerment is neither episodic nor temporary. On the contrary, it should be regularized and ongoing to weaken the structural foundations of the inequalities and injustices entwined in the conflict.

**Profiles in practice**

The two main principles of social justice and empowerment outlined above are widespread. Similarly, the practices we profile below are common, and discussed here simply as a few among many possible examples.
Listening projects and envisioning processes

Listening projects are often used in response to community-based conflicts. They contain multiple components that include creating interactive and participatory processes that aim for understanding the historical and contemporary roots of a community’s conflict, identifying and assessing the cross-cutting needs of various parties, uncovering the aspirational goals latent within the community, and envisioning new horizons.

Listening projects generally use small teams from the community, trained in the reflective listening skills integral to constructive conflict management. These small teams interview various stakeholders about their needs, interests, and viewpoints. The goal has less to do with creating consensus and more to do with using communication to produce mutual understanding and empowerment for all participants. This data-gathering and deep listening has potent de-escalatory potential while also building community capacities in shared problem definition, leading to collective problem solving. Originally developed by the US-based Rural Southern Voice for Peace (now Listening Project: Community Listening, Empowerment, Change) to assist communities with deep-seated racial conflicts and environmental injustices, it has been successfully applied in many other countries, including Micronesia, Nicaragua, and Croatia (Bloch, 2005; Walters, 1993).

Envisioning workshops are loosely related to listening projects and have been used in a variety of conflict settings. Envisioning workshops like the seven-step process detailed by Elise Boulding (1988) help community members move beyond focusing on current problems and what they may be against to concentrate instead on the vision of a positive, shared civic future. Notably, the final step develops a plan for getting to that now shared, aspirational future. Envisioning practices have even transformed complex, multi-party public sector disputes. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, a city that experienced severe economic downtowns, community-based envisioning processes laid the groundwork for the reinvention of its identity and political economy (Parr, 1999). The applied practices of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), also widely used across community and especially organizational conflicts, includes many of these same insights.

Community mediation

The civil rights, peace, women’s, and environmental movements from the 1950s through the 1970s influenced spin-off movements. For example, as women reasserted control over their bodies and as take-back-the-night marches made streets somewhat safer for women, the notion of civil society taking back control of other arenas took hold. One such arena was the community mediation movement, which spawned neighborhood and community-based alternatives to formal court systems, perceived to be unresponsive, costly, slow, and overly partial to status quo interests at the expense of traditionally disadvantaged populations. In short, court systems were seen as disempowering.

Aided by peace studies scholars and practitioners, many early mediation centers trained neighborhood residents in mediation processes and helped establish neighborhood dispute centers that relied mostly on volunteer mediators. This allowed disputants to keep their conflicts out of the court system and gave them control of the conflict outcomes – the essence of mediation practice. Notably, these community mediation centers increased community capacities and one spill-over effect was the further empowerment of volunteer mediators, who could now apply their constructive conflict management skills in other community settings.

Research on community mediation in the US demonstrates that many state-wide networks achieve high agreement rates (70–80 percent of cases), impressive “satisfaction with the process”
rates (84–90 percent), extremely high “satisfaction with the mediators” rates (88–100 percent), and laudable “satisfaction with the mediation resolution” rates (73–86 percent) (Hedeen, 2004). Relative to court systems, these are heady numbers. Community-based dispute resolution, as an alternative to formalized or government-controlled systems, has also been established in other settings, e.g., school systems, cultures, i.e., Indigenous communities, and countries, manifesting culturally relevant formulations.

Still, all is not rosy on the community mediation front. Like many alternative enterprises, funding is a perpetual problem. Also, reliance upon community mediation centers as a reliable alternative has been spotty. The ironic result is that many centers are dependent for both case referrals and funding on the formalized court systems to which they were meant to be an alternative (Hedeen & Coy, 2000). As form often follows funding, this has resulted in various degrees of cooptation by the state and vested court interests (Coy & Hedeen, 2005), taking some of the community out of community mediation.

Alternatives to violence programs

The peace and conflict studies field has also been active in providing alternative resources to those caught up in prison systems through the Alternatives to Violence (AVP) and similar programs. Originally designed by Quaker educators and mediators active in the New York prison system, highly interactive AVP workshops often occur over multiple days and rely on those cooperative learning, participatory models that have proven successful in training volunteer mediators and increasing democratic community capacities (Hedeen, 2005). Developing skills in active listening, constructive assertions, and building self-esteem are all essential to building a sense of community and mutual trust in trying, often violence-prone situations (John, 2015).

Using insights drawn from the peace and conflict studies field, AVP workshops are held in prisons in 35 US states and in more than 50 countries, including in conflict zones, refugee camps, women’s shelters and prison systems. More than 14,000 people participate annually (Novek, 2011). Participants learn the transforming power of recognition and acknowledgment, potentially facilitating a reciprocal openness in the other and thereby avoiding the escalating dynamics that denials and rejections usually bring. Many AVP workshops use a train the trainer model so that inmates train inmates. Maryland prison system AVP programs show positive effects on anger management and levels of confrontation. They may also contribute to a decrease in prison violence and translate in positive ways back to the community following the release of inmates who completed the program (Walrath, 2001).²

Restorative justice

Restorative justice (RJ) aims to address the many problems of the criminal justice system. Early uses stem from the Victim-Offender Reconciliation Programs begun in the 1970s (Umbreit et al., 2004). RJ includes talking circles, alternative sentencing programs, multi-door court systems, and diversion programs (cf. Liebmann, 2007; Pranis et al., 2003). Each is designed to address criminal acts – usually minor or nonviolent offenses – through a reparative rather than retributive process. Some of the rationales for RJ parallel those for community mediation centers that rose in the same time period, namely that the traditional, retributive, justice system tended to exclude victims’ voices and often did little to reduce recidivism. Instead, restorative justice sought to reframe crime as damage to relationships and communities rather than the transgression of the criminal against society (Zehr, 1990).
The key elements of social justice and empowerment are integral to RJ. Adherents believe that decision-making should reside with those impacted by the offense, justice should be focused on healing and transformation, and this combination should decrease recidivism. Empowerment transpires when victims can communicate directly with the offenders and have a say in restitution (Zehr, 2002). Offenders also gain by taking responsibility for the harm and for its repair. Improving relationships requires that other stakeholders beyond the victims and offenders have a voice, too. Rather than the adjudication of fact, the dialogic process helps the parties explore their relationships and uncover new knowledge about each other (Umbreit et al., 2004). Notably, this broadening of roles for the victim, offender, and other stakeholders challenges the entrenched power interests of the justice system. The resulting strain between the justice system’s goals of reducing costs and recidivism, and restorative justice’s advocacy of social justice and empowerment, replicates the tensions between process and outcome outlined above. These tensions are necessary to balance relational and process related issues with outcomes and structural problems.

Nonviolent action

Another practice arena intimately related to peace and conflict studies is nonviolent action. A 2005 Hewlett Foundation-funded study of peace and conflict studies degree programs, offered in the US and Canada, collected 120 syllabi from these programs. When coded for the central concepts of the courses, nonviolence was the fourth most frequent central focus, trailing only peace (making), conflict intervention, and conflict, albeit by substantial margins (Coy & Hedeen, 2006).

A now robust literature of both case studies and empirical research has established the constructive tendencies of nonviolent struggle. Nonviolent conflict escalation has high potentialities to achieve the following: developing collective identities around a just cause; redressing paralyzing power asymmetries; cultivating influential allies; creating backfire dynamics and increasing defections from the other side if they use violence against nonviolent actors; and convincing bystanders to eschew apathy and become involved in the struggle (Coy, 2017; Nepstad, 2015). This is why nonviolent conflict escalation generally leads to more constructive outcomes compared to violence, or to the strategies of avoidance, compromise, or accommodation (Martin & Varney, 2003).

One strength of nonviolent struggle and a salient contributor to it being twice as likely to succeed as violence (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011) is its low participation threshold. One does not need to learn how to shoot a gun or read a radar screen to be an effective nonviolent activist. On the other hand, it has been shown that the considerable power of nonviolent struggle can be increased further through rigorous training and deliberate practice leading to expert performance (Martin & Coy, 2017).

Accompaniment

In situations marked by extreme political violence where local campaigners are harassed, imprisoned, or assassinated due to their human rights promotion and social change activism, nonviolent protective accompaniment may increase safe political space. In protective accompaniment, uniformed observers who are part of a nongovernmental organization or international network walk alongside threatened local activists to deter attacks. Peace Brigades International in Latin America pioneered accompaniment in the 1980s when military dictatorships and political repression were nearly the norm.
There are at least three reasons to use this nonviolent tactic. First, to deter attacks. Accompaniment relies, in part, on the well-established Observer Effect principle for its presumed deterrent capabilities. The Observer Effect states that people can be generally relied upon to adjust their behavior to varying degrees when they know they are being observed. This is self-evident in our personal and social settings, and is no less true in highly charged political spaces, sometimes even more so. Second, if deterrence fails and an attack occurs, the observer is present to document the violence and disseminate that news, often through a naming and shaming campaign. This is thought to raise the costs of aggression while contributing to the increased power of deterrence in future scenarios (Mahony & Eguren, 1997). Third, the robust empowerment effects that accompaniment often has for local activists — allowing them to do what they otherwise would not — can be considerable; these empowerment effects are also well-established in the peace and conflict studies literature (Coy, 1997, 2018; Julian & Schweitzer, 2015).

Approximately 35 organizations are currently providing protective accompaniment and using unarmed civilian peacekeepers, including Witness for Peace, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Christian Peacemaker Teams, International Solidarity Movement, the Fellowship of Reconciliation’s Peace Presence, and Peace Brigades International. Peace studies scholars have played prominent roles in these organizations. This is a burgeoning application of nonviolent theory and practice, now used in a wide variety of conflict situations, from the South Sudan to Canada to Nepal. Randy Janzen’s (2014) recent research shows accompaniment teams have been deployed on six continents and in 35 different countries just since 1990. Despite commonalities, these diverse organizations also demonstrate noteworthy variances in their understanding of nonpartisanship, their degree of interventionism, and their adherence to or violation of local and national laws while attempting to protect local activists (for a comparative analysis on these issues, see Coy, 2012).

**Problemsolving workshops and track II**

A starting point for academic entry into conflict resolution practice was what John Burton (1969) described as controlled communication and what later developed into the Problem-Solving Workshop (PSW) and Track II diplomacy (Jones, 2015). This practice was originally devised as an academic exercise to bring together influential members of conflicting societies, namely those who are not serving members of either government, but who may have access to these members (Kelman 2000). The core of the PSW and Track II interventions is to bring these influentials, or pre-influentials, together under controlled circumstances — sometimes in secret — usually far from the conflict site. The influentials are joined by academics trained in conflict resolution — and sometimes with regional expertise — to assist the parties in a shared analysis of the conflict, leading to action plans for the settlement, resolution, or transformation of the conflict.

The parties themselves are responsible for conflict analysis and for developing steps leading to the peaceful resolution. The third party’s role is limited to facilitating, keeping the parties on track and providing academic expertise on conflict processes in comparison with other conflicts. Trained interveners work in a non-directive way, trying to ensure that the parties own the process and are responsible for the outcome (Jones, 2015).

The analysis–based approach of the PSW and Track II diplomacy assists parties to view their conflict as a shared problem and encourages mutual understandings of the conflict’s sources and dynamics. This allows parties to identify conflict sources that fuel social injustice and to develop just, stable outcomes. There are several variations of PSW, with some focusing on
youth participation across the conflict divide (Ben-Yitzhak, 2010) and others using the process at the grassroots community level (Nan & Greiff, 2013). But in all the two themes of addressing social injustices and empowerment that we identify above are central to these processes and their potential success.

**Peacebuilding and zones of peace**

In our final examination of how principles inform practice we examine the broad field of peacebuilding and the narrower concept of Zones of Peace (ZoPs). Much of peacebuilding fieldwork – and a good deal of the scholarship – is derived from more mainstream fields such as development, political science, and international relations. Liberal peacebuilding is often top-down and more concerned with developing institutions and economics than with seeking social justice or local empowerment (cf. Hancock, 2016). This means many of the practices used in peacebuilding do not incorporate either of our two main principles.

The bridge between peacebuilding and our principles starts with those critical peacebuilding scholars who show that failure to focus on either social justice or empowerment often leads to failures of the liberal peace (cf. Autesserre, 2014; Mac Ginty, 2010; Richmond, 2011). Like critical development scholars in the 1980s (cf. Worsley, 1984), critical peacebuilding scholars insist that successful peacebuilding requires stronger local ownership, stronger local agency – reflecting the need for empowerment of those most affected by peacebuilding programs (Donais, 2012; Mac Ginty, 2014; Richmond & Pogodda, 2016).

The connection between social justice, empowerment, and peacebuilding is most fully articulated in Zones of Peace (ZoP), which show how local communities – both during and after conflicts – exercise agency and work for social justice in places like Colombia, the Philippines, and El Salvador (Hancock & Mitchell, 2007). Those ZoPs that have broad participation bases and community support tend to be more successful than those whose leadership fails to empower (Hancock, 2018; Idler et al., 2015; Mitchell & Hancock, 2007). Local and international agencies that work with ZoPs are often careful to be facilitative to ensure that ZoP members articulate their own visions of peacebuilding, and meet local needs to achieve local social justice and empowerment (Hancock, 2016). ZoPs that develop and practice deliberative democracy and accountability towards their communities – rather than towards funders – are seen as more legitimate by their communities, and at times by international funders (Hancock, 2018).

**An ethos-driven orientation**

Peace and conflict studies practice is marked by tensions between principles of empowerment and social justice on the one hand and a results-driven focus on the other. Empowerment and social justice are often articulated by questions of who should be included in the process and a stronger focus on the process itself. The results-driven focus has two drivers: demonstrating the usefulness of different practice forms; and showing the cost-effectiveness of conflict resolution when compared to other, more confrontational, practices. Both approaches are partly defined by the field of evaluation, which can focus on formative, summative, and process evaluation efforts (Rossi et al., 1999).

Evaluations, especially summative and process evaluations, are about accountability. To whom is any particular conflict resolution process accountable? To the parties involved in the conflict? To the funders who pay for these efforts? To the elected representatives, who are responsible for the area in which the process operates? These relevant questions illustrate the
tension between principled and outcome-driven approaches to practice. The former is necessary for successful processes while the latter is essential to demonstrate to supporting stakeholders that their contributions are bearing fruit.

Parties on both sides of this equation, those focused on principles and those on outcomes, have valid concerns. One manner of addressing both is to focus on systematic evaluation of conflict resolution efforts. However, as explored by Hancock (2016) and Galtung and Tisné (2009), the accountability offered through evaluation efforts tends to prioritize funders over participants. Another method for balancing this tension is to rely upon “best practices,” or what we prefer to call good practices. These are steps that practitioners are urged – or required – to follow to meet the needs of disputing parties and other stakeholders in an ethical manner. Most good practices tend to be drawn from evaluation research (cf. Church & Shouldice, 2003; Hedeen, 2004; Nan et al., 2009; Raines et al., 2010). These analyses incline to be complex, noting issues such as cultural appropriateness of some intervention methods as well as power differentials between different actors and the need to pay attention to empowerment and social justice. However, other studies focus more on the outcome end of the spectrum, privileging rigid as opposed to flexible outcomes and attending more to the needs of the funding community than to those in conflict (cf. Paris, 1997; Schoenhaus & United States Institute of Peace, 2001).

The key, we believe, to bridging this tension between principle and outcome-driven practice is not to abandon the idea of good practices, but to interrogate our good practices – indeed all of our practices – with respect to both questions. How does practice engender the empowerment of the parties involved? How does it respect the needs of stakeholders who might not be at the table? How does the practice engender social justice? We believe these tensions can best be reconciled – while recognizing that there may always be some tradeoffs – through ethos.

Conflict resolution is openly and reflexively normative. Being normative means that peace and conflict studies scholars and practitioners seek to address problems at the deepest levels possible in order to achieve positive social good. In Becker’s (1967) terms, that sometimes means asking whose side we are on. As described by Laue and Cormick (1978), we also need to ask whether reaching a conflict resolution will promote social justice – not because failing to do so would be problematic for the intervener, but because it may prove troublesome in the long run for the principals and still others.

The key for using good practices as guideposts is to ensure that they remain infused with the ethos of the field. That ethos, as demonstrated through the many different forms of practice discussed here, is the twin commitment to empowering the conflict parties to be active agents, and to assisting them to seek social justice, which may address the sources of their conflict. If our good practices can be infused with this ethos, instead of being focused on the outcome of getting an agreement or reducing administrative costs, then perhaps we will succeed in putting our principles into practice.

Notes

1 Also see the Listening project online at www.listeningproject.info.
2 Also see the Alternatives to Violence Project at www.avpusa.org or avpinternational.org.
3 These are just primary types of evaluation, for more detail see (Bush & Duggan, 2013; Church & Shouldice, 2003; Hedeen, 2004).
4 We prefer “good practices” terminology to acknowledge the complications arising from cultural contexts.
5 For more on alternatives forms of accountability see Donais, 2012; Galtung & Tisné, 2009; Pinnington, 2014).
References


