Review of: "Conflict Resolution Applications to Peace Studies"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

As a rhetorical piece, this article makes a strong case for the use of transformative methods in conflict management and articulates thereby an ethos of hope. This is its strength, for those in conflict lose sight of their common humanity, lose hope in justice, and resign themselves to despair, anger, and violence. The article works as an appeal to those in conflict or war, and those with the opportunity to broker the cessation of hostilities and commitment to peace, to take the courageous first steps of recognition that pave the way forward out of resignation, despair, anger, and violence.

While I see considerable room for strengthening the argument and grounding the discussion with examples, this article has the potential to make a timely contribution to the fields of conflict resolution and peace studies, particularly through the case the author makes for transformative methods. The author demonstrates a refined skill in synthesising a practical program from divergent paradigms. The article is well-written, although I found one unfinished sentence: "It requires a deep understanding of the historical and social contexts of conflicts and a commitment to engaging with."

The author sees the need for rapprochement between the practical approaches of conflict resolution and the field of peace studies and identifies a need to integrate the differential ethical discourses of these two fields: the impartiality and neutrality that underlies the ability of a mediator to engender trust, and the unequivocal commitment to universal human rights and holding perpetrators accountable under international law that are foundational to lasting peace. In my view, the author, while posing some useful questions in this regard, does not demonstrate a strong differential to be overcome. Rather, he outlines common ethical dilemmas and responsibilities.

The author does not provide a detailed discussion of any particular methods of mediation and conflict resolution, and while championing transformative methods, does not describe what they are. This is a shortcoming of the article as drafted, and I urge the author to provide a clearer description and examples of transformative methods in mediation and conflict resolution, how they differ from other approaches practically, and their efficiency and effectiveness in boosting mutual recognition by conflict participants of each other's motivations, interests, and values.

The author several times refers to the value of transformative methods for addressing root causes and structural inequalities. I would like to see some elaboration of this discussion. The term 'root causes' might suggest to some readers something along the lines of primordial differences, age-old disputes, or deep historical memory. On the contrary, the author's discussion is more helpfully focused on the way transformative approaches increase the parties' awareness of context (their own and the other's, including the impact of societal norms and institutions). In my view, 'contextual factors' would be a more apt term than 'root causes', and would also avoid the ambiguity of the latter term and the interminable

quest for an originary right. The author uncritically refers to the work of Chuol (2023) regarding conflicts arising out of deep-seated grievances and power imbalances. There is an unexplored question here about whether indeed a past event or even a structural inequality causes conflict. I would have liked to see greater consideration of how the human responses to such factors lead to conflict. The value of transformative methods, as the author points out, is in shifting the way people see the world and each other. That is, they help people to respond differently to their contexts and each other, not removing or necessarily 'addressing' causal factors, but transforming social behaviours and institutions. This, in my view, transforms people's ability to manage conflict, rather than envisaging a transcendence of conflict. Closer consideration of such questions would assist the author in removing some ambivalence in his argument and conclusions around realistic aims of conflict resolution practices.

The article falls short of several of its promises, particularly the promise of detailed 'content analysis' and case studies. The article skims the surface of scholarly debates. The author does demonstrate considerable facility with key paradigms from the fields he discusses, but does so at arm's length. I am not sure exactly what to have expected as 'content analysis', but I did not find many examples or case studies in the text, and those that were presented were not discussed in any detail.

Some of the author's conclusions read as ideal-typical or even fanciful scenarios rather than providing a guide to practice that comprehends the messy realities of strained relations and imperfect peace. The challenge that parties in large-scale intra- and international conflict and peacemakers face is how to hold onto hope and hard-won trust when actions continue to betray that trust. The rosy picture of the ideal end point may not be sufficient inspiration. For example, while a desired outcome of conflict mediation and resolution processes may be the fostering of a collaborative spirit, this is not a guaranteed outcome. Similarly, while we might imagine a 'thriving ecosystem where every individual can flourish, free from the shadows of past grievances and systemic inequities', this again is rather more fanciful than real-world expectations of a conflict mediation process.

I urge the author to clarify what is meant by 'content analysis' (or remove this as a promise if it is superfluous). More importantly, I urge the author to add one or more case studies that are explored in greater depth to support his conclusions, or to boost the discussion of the examples given, such as the end of Apartheid in South Africa. The conclusions are arguable; they are just not at present well substantiated and run the risk of sounding like mere platitudes, however apt they may be.

The coverage of literature is thin. I cannot speak to the larger scholarly discourse in either conflict studies or peace studies, but I urge the author to provide stronger justification for the more selective use of literature that underlies his argument, by situating that selection more securely in relation to that wider literature. My own field expertise is in the anthropology of conflict and the practice of transformative mediation, and from that background, I urge the author also to investigate the literature on the constitutive and integrative aspects of conflict, for example, Max Gluckman's 'Peace in the Feud' (in Gluckman 1973), and the work of Creed (2004) and Pilbrow (2020), all of which critique the consensus model of community. Just as the transformative approaches in mediation and conflict resolution constitute a qualitative shift in practice from a focus on rights and interests to a focus on relationship healing, so also, there is transformative potential in

envisaging conflict as integrative (binding people in a sphere of common engagement, however painful and fraught) rather than assuming that conflict is only interpretable as divisive. If the starting point of conflict is that the parties do not inhabit the same cultural frames, can the conflict (and its resolution) constitute a means to creating new cultural frames that acknowledge and integrate the conflicting perspectives and interests?

The following are further questions and comments for consideration that were sparked as I read the article and that might assist in reframing the argument in more practical terms.

- How does the directionality of violence affect the methods and outcomes of conflict resolution (i.e., does it make a difference whether it is the dominant or the weak party that acts first)?
- Are some forms of conflict and conflict-linked violence justifiable, e.g., an uprising against injustice?
- What are the barriers to ceasing hostilities when one or other party derives a benefit from maintaining a conflict state, or when either party feels justified in their stance?
- What methods are most useful in moving parties from physical actions into rhetorical actions as a step towards mediation or resolution?
- Mediation does not necessarily mean 'resolution' the way we might ordinarily imagine it. It may mean a 'translation' (shift sideways to another domain) rather than a meeting half-way or at a negotiated unequal point between positions.
- What might resolution mean? Equitable reduction in conflict activities/violence? Who is the judge of this? What is the end point? 'Prevention'? 'Absence of conflict'? – or a just and equitable forum for airing and mediating or adjudicating grievances?
- Some conflicts have division as the expected outcome (divorce) – fighting to establish differentiation and boundaries. Some have integration as the expected outcome (civil war) – fighting over the power to define a common set of interests.

I look forward to seeing the author's further development of this article.

Cited literature:

Creed, G.W. 2004 'Constituted through conflict: Images of community (and nation) in Bulgarian rural ritual' *American Anthropologist*, 106(1):56–70, DOI: 10.1525/aa.2004.106.1.56.

Gluckman, M. 1973 (1956) *Custom and Conflict in Africa,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Pilbrow, T. 2020 'The integrative value of conflict and dispute: Implications for defining community in the native title context', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 31(1):37-50, DOI: 10.1111/taja.12344.