

Narrative Mediation: Re-authoring Conflict Stories

AC Resolution

Author: J. Winslade & G. Monk

Two recent movies, *Stranger Than Fiction* and *The Number 23*, follow normal every-day characters whose lives suddenly seem to directly parallel stories written by others; their lives seem to come under the control of the writer. These movies explore the anxiety that may result from consciously being trapped in someone else's story of conflict.

In a similar manner, narrative mediation envisions the persons involved in a conflict as having become trapped in a conflict story from which they can see no way out. However, unlike the protagonists in the movies, the persons involved in narrative mediation have access to a mediator who, with skill and sensitivity, can assist them in re-authoring their story into one with a more successful conclusion. With narrative mediation, if not a "happily ever after" ending, then at least a "happier ever after" ending may be achieved.

Narrative mediation arises out of the postmodern theory of cultural constructivism. This theory proposes that people's experiences of the world are directly influenced by the stories and values of their culture. Each person creates his/her own life narrative, influenced by the stories and values of the culture, which gives life its meaning and direction. When two or more individual's narratives bump into each other in an incompatible way, a new narrative of conflict may arise. This perspective is a shift from common assumptions about conflict which often emphasize inner drives, interests, facts and causes. The narrative mediator is more interested in facilitating the expression of disputants' stories and uncovering their meanings within these stories.

Winslade and Monk identify three broad goals for narrative mediation: a) the creation of an alternative relationship story; b) the deconstruction of the dominance of the conflict story; and c) the opening of space for people to make discursive shifts. (p. 12)

The dominance of the conflict story may overshadow alternative stories of cooperation, understanding and mutual respect. In order to create an alternative relationship story, narrative mediation focuses on the relational conditions between the two parties. The narrative mediator may facilitate subtle positive shifts in the relationship by inviting disputants to relate times when their relationship was characterized by greater collaboration and acceptance. These previous positive relational attitudes may then provide a new context and perspective on the current conflicted relationship.

The process of deconstructing the dominance of the conflict story includes exposing narrative assumptions and externalizing the conflict. During the construction of conflict stories assumptions are often made that include entitlement claims and the power relations involved. It is important that the narrative mediator help explore these assumptions in the conflict narrative so that they can be considered and challenged during the process of mediation.

A concrete way of weakening the dominance of a conflict story is to facilitate the process of "externalizing the conflict". In this process, the mediator helps the disputants to speak about the conflict "as if it were an external object exerting an influence on the parties but not identified solely with either party." (p. 13)

The goal of opening space for shifts can be realized by facilitating the use of different descriptors for conflict issues and allowing parties to reposition themselves within the conflict narrative. When these shifts occur, the potential for re-storying occurs. Re-storying gives the parties the opportunity to co-author a new narrative in which they are freed from the traps of the conflict story. A new type of story, and relationship, can begin.

Winslade and Monk emphasize that every conflict story contains contradictions that can be used as openings by a skilled mediator to pave the way to a new "happier ever after" story.

More information about narrative mediation can be found in Winslade and Monk's book *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution* (available at the FDR office).

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Abstract prepared by Matthew Dahlsten, FDR Graduate Assistant