

The Self in Conflict

McGuigan, R., & Popp, N. (2007). The self in conflict: The evolution of mediation. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 25(2), 221-238.

Inspired by Bush and Folger's (1994) critical debate regarding whether or not mediation is primarily a settlement-driven process or one that emphasizes relational development and has transformative potential, McGuigan and Popp (2007) seek in this article to situate mediation experience and the meaning-making it entails through a constructive-developmental lens (Kegan et al., 2001; Kegan, 1982, 1994).

Transformational mediation is defined as "involving a conviction that disputing parties, while struggling with their passions and divisions, can achieve moral and ethical growth as a consequence of the potential for empowerment and recognition that conflict contains" (p. 221-2). Overall, the authors' intention in this article is twofold: (a) to introduce the notion that conflict is a constructed experience for each party involved; and (b) to suggest that individual construction of the conflict experience follows a predictable trajectory of increasing complexity. Specifically, the authors first provide an overview of constructive-developmental theory; then describe three primary mindsets along the developmental continuum that adults encounter; and finally discuss implications for the mediation field.

Conflict Through a Constructive-Developmental Lens

Essentially, McGuigan and Popp contend that an understanding of Kegan's constructive-developmental theory will not only illuminate how disputants construct meanings, respond, mediate, resolve a conflict in different ways but also suggest ways to transform both the mediator's and the disputant's understanding of conflict. Below are some key components of the constructive-developmental theory as it is applied to the mediation process.

- Constructive-developmental theory brings together two potent lines of human development: *constructivism* (the notion that individuals create meanings from their experiences) and *developmentalism* (the notion that individuals' actual process of constructing meaning evolves through qualitatively different stages of increasing complexity).
- Rooted in biological science, constructive-developmental theory conceives an ongoing yet dynamic process of constructing meaning and a developmental trajectory of adult growth. That is, the increasing complexity of the meaning that individuals make in and of their lives is linked with their engagement in the increasingly complex social and environmental surround.
- "The activity of being a person is the activity of meaning-making" (Kegan, 1982, p. 11). Thus, when the meaning one creates is not understood, valued, or respected by others, it threatens one's sense of wholeness and in turn often results in conflict.
- This gradual evolution of the making-making process gives shape and conference to human understanding of life in general and conflict in particular.

Viewing conflict through such a constructive-developmental lens, McGuigan and Popp challenge two assumptions of the conflict field leading to their discussion of the mindsets in conflict in the next section: (a) each disputant has equal capacity to separate the people from the problem once they have heard each other's perspective; and (b) each participant has the capacity to take the perspective of the other by momentarily setting aside their own.

Mindsets in Conflict

Based on Kegan's (1982) developmental continuum along the six primary stages of development he identifies, McGuigan and Popp discuss and review three primary mindsets in adulthood: (a) *the instrumental mindset*; (b) *the affiliative mindset*; (c) *the self-authoring mindset*.

The Instrumental Mindset

The Instrumental Mindset is characterized by concrete orientation to the world, inability to think abstractly, and preoccupation with satisfying one's own concrete needs. In conflict situations, those with this mindset

often experience conflict as in “You’re wrong, I’m right, and I can’t get what I want.” Conflict is often experienced as concrete disagreement around concrete rules. Those with this mindset prefer to deal with conflict through threatening, cajoling, persuading, arguing, and retaliating so as to get the other disputants to do what they want or to get what they want. A person with this mindset only understands the other’s perspective in opposition to her/his own, because s/he understands the world through dualities: one of them has to be right and the other has to be wrong. The organizing principle for those with the instrumental mindset might be the question – “What do I have to do to get what I want?”

The Affiliative Mindset

The Affiliative Mindset is characterized by a strong identification with the group to which s/he belongs, concern with how others view her or him, and an orientation toward mutuality and loyalty. To those with this mindset, conflict is particularly stressful. In conflict situations, those with this mindset often experience conflict as a direct attack on the self and an irreparable rift in relationship where the self feels literally pulled apart by the rift since it is defined by the relationship that is being pulled apart by the disagreement, such as in “You have betrayed me.” In dealing with conflict, those with this mindset will either disengage from the relationship or change one’s stance to be in agreement with other. In terms of perspective-taking, a person with this mindset will either be extremely empathic or sever the connection and reject the other’s perspective. The organizing principle for those with the affiliative mindset might be the question – “Can’t we all just get along?”

The self-authoring mindset

The self-authoring mindset is characterized by concern with how one is making oneself and also concern with one’s own integrity and competence as judged by one’s own self-generated and self-imposed standards. Those with this mindset experience conflict as a difference of opinion or standard and as a necessary element of human relationship and interaction as in “Your worldview is very different from mine.” In this mindset, conflict can be experienced externally, internally, or both. Whereas an external conflict may be the signal of a misunderstanding or the clash of values that can be resolved, an internal conflict might feel like a threat to one’s own integrity or competence. In dealing with conflict, a person with this mindset will try to understand the other side and use conflict as an opportunity to learn more about oneself, the other, and the issue. A person with this mindset has the capacity to take many different perspectives at the same time. The organizing principle for those with the self-authoring mindset might be this statement – “Let’s acknowledge and respect each other’s individuality and our differences and celebrate what we can offer to each other.”

Implications for the Mediation Field

The first implication stemming from Kegan’s constructive-development understanding of adult growth is – when mediators ask disputants to take the perspective of the other parties in a conflict situation, mediators may be asking some of the disputants to do something that they cannot do, because they may not have developed the complexity of the mind to do so. The second implication is – Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory highlights that the meaning, values, and purpose of mediation are developmentally bound and profoundly inform the mediator’s construction of his or her intervention process. Thus, this view endorses the need for the mediation training field to encourage the growth of consciousness and offer transformational learning in addition to the traditional approach of informational training. Kegan describes **transformational learning** as a “leading out from an established habit of mind” (1994, p. 232). The last implication is – working with the transformational approach requires the mediators to challenge their own assumptions about who the disputants are and what capacities they have for perspective-taking, and also requires the mediators to change their goals and experiences in response to the actual mindsets of their clients.

Overall, Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory has the potential to view disputes as opportunities for moral growth and transformation and opens doors to more comprehensive way of understanding the mediator’s work as a vocation and a psychological growth.

(Summary prepared by Yea-Wen Chen, FDR Graduate Assistant)