

# To Be or Not To Be: Conflict Resolution as a Discipline by Ray Leal

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In academic circles one's discipline is generally considered a body of knowledge that distinguishes one's view of the world from other views. For example, the sociologist studies societal processes and groups while the legal scholar uses jurisprudence and legal reasoning to explain the world. While in the past many research efforts were limited to investigation in one discipline, serious research is increasingly characterized by collaboration among researchers from several academic disciplines. I will argue that conflict resolution is emerging as a new discipline which has grown out of these innovative collaborations among various disciplines.

Is conflict resolution destined to become a discipline or is it, as critics claim, just a passing fad? Most disciplines include a specialized body of knowledge to be mastered, specialized areas (sub-fields) of knowledge, accepted theories or models, research protocols, established journals of research findings, application of disciplinary knowledge to societal problems, professional associations, and licensing in some cases. Conflict resolution in all its forms (negotiation, conciliation, mediation, and arbitration) is as old as human nature. Anthropologists have found ADR practice in many different cultures including a Chinese, Native American and the Quaker culture.

The growth of conflict resolution over the last fifteen to twenty years in America points to its recognition as a discipline in some

circles. First with regard to a specialized body of knowledge, students of conflict resolution must come to know conflict theory, communications skills, cultural styles and models, problem solving, or organizational theory, change management, and legal processes. Clearly these elements of knowledge point to a variety of disciplines that include, among others, law, sociology, political science, communications, and education. The conflict resolution practitioner, student, and scholar must be prepared to adopt an interdisciplinary view of the world.

Second, conflict resolution now includes specialized areas of knowledge; it is rare to find a conflict resolver who has mastery of all the sub fields. We find conflict in our schools, families, neighborhoods, organizations, and all levels of government, and conflict resolvers have specific knowledge about the procedures, skills, and techniques appropriate for a specific context or location. Specialists in conflict resolution today include negotiators, arbitrators, conciliators, attorney mediators, training consultants, community mediators, school and university mediators, and multi-party public policy and environmental mediators. As conflict resolvers, we must accept the substantive limits of our knowledge and our procedural skill training, and allow these limits to determine in which conflicts we should intervene.

Third, the pioneering works of Boulding, Deutsch, Fisher, and others have presented us with some theoretical underpinnings of a discipline. Since those early years, hundreds of books dealing with conflict resolution have been published and a variety of academic degree programs established which grant graduate degrees, including the doctorate, in conflict resolution. Theory building in this new discipline is on-going and in an exciting phase for scholars of the field as a variety of models are available for investigation. These models include the in-class curriculum model, the school based

mediation model, law related education, university based mediation programs, the community based model, the collaborative school/university/community mediation model, academic programs, the environmental/public policy model, the organizational model, and the court ordered mediation model. Proponents of these various models include the nation's schools, universities, community dispute resolution centers, law schools, courts, criminal justice agencies, corporations, and governments.

A fourth element of a discipline is its research agenda and protocols and the means (established journals) to disseminate research findings. Recently a meeting at Columbia University brought together some of the researchers in the field to begin devising the research agenda for the remainder of the decade. In the 1980s, journals and newsletters were established for the field of conflict resolution. Increasingly today, articles concerning conflict resolution are finding their way into journals from other disciplines such as education. Research has been conducted; while some of it may have been an anecdotal, efforts to conduct more rigorous research are under way. The recent merger between school and university mediators and scholars in NAME lends strength to this effort. The primary reason for limited research projects at this point has been the emphasis on the application of conflict resolution skills. In arenas badly in need of new ways to resolve disputes, notably schools, communities, and courts, the conflict resolution practitioners have been busy. Now that conflict resolution is known at a national level, research funds should become more available. At this juncture, research should focus on assessing the effectiveness of the conflict resolution work of the past decade.

Finally, it seems that an accepted discipline forms its own professional associations as a means to share information, developments, and research as well as a way to determine

appropriate standards for the discipline. Conflict resolution associations such as NAME, NCPCR, NIDR, SPIDER, the Academy of Family Mediators, various Canadian associations, and the American Bar Association's Dispute Resolution Section have acted as clearinghouses and have brought together various segments of the discipline through annual conferences. Training centers such as Community Boards, CDR Associates, Illinois Institute for Dispute Resolution, New Mexico Center for Dispute Resolution, and many other state and regional training organizations have helped to set standards for the training of conflict resolvers. While standards and codes of ethics have been developed, the certification or regulation of conflict resolvers, particularly mediators, varies from state to state. Recently, conflict resolvers have talked of establishing national standards for certification. A closer association among the major conflict resolution organizations would allow for a standardized code of ethics and qualifications and thus for the self regulation of the discipline by its members.

Based on these developments, I conclude that the field of conflict resolution has matured into a new but stable discipline. However, one must accept the interdisciplinary nature of the field; while new doctoral programs in conflict resolution have emerged, these programs take an interdisciplinary approach to their curriculum. The interdisciplinary nature is hopeful because, as any practitioner knows, conflict happens in many places and levels in our society.

Like other new disciplines, conflict resolution will mature and change over time and ultimately, I expect, make a major contribution to our knowledge about the world. As peacemakers we must usher in the new millennium with peace in our minds, hearts and spirits. As chief Joseph once told us, "We shall see in the end. Perhaps we are all brothers and sisters."

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