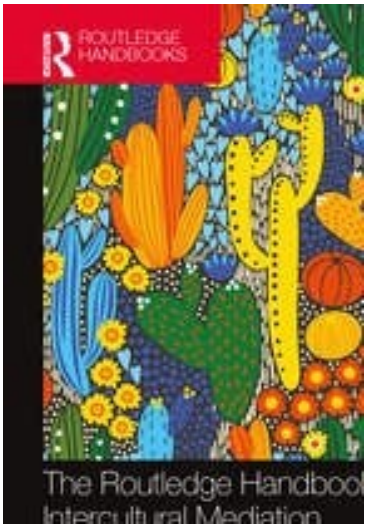

The Routledge Handbook of Intercultural Mediation

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Abstract

Offering unique coverage of an emerging, interdisciplinary area, this comprehensive handbook examines the theoretical underpinnings and emergent conceptions of intercultural mediation in related fields of study.

Authored by global experts in fields from intercultural communication and conflict resolution to translation studies, literature, political science, and foreign language teaching, chapters trace the history, development, and present state of approaches to intercultural mediation. The

sections in this volume show how the concept of intercultural mediation has been constructed among different fields and shaped by its specific applications in an open cycle of influence. The book parses different philosophical conceptions as well as pragmatic approaches, providing ample grounding in the key perspectives on this growing field of discourse.

The Routledge Handbook of Intercultural Mediation is a valuable reference for graduate and postgraduate students studying mediation, conflict resolution, intercultural communication, translation, and psychology, as well as for practitioners and researchers in those fields and beyond.

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INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION FROM A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Agostino Portera

Introduction

The world in which we are living is undergoing dramatic changes. Today we are witnessing an increase in encounters, which often turn into clashes and conflicts, sometimes highly destructive. In all sectors of our lives there is a growing fluidity or liquidity. We are living in a time of "nowist culture" and "hurried culture" (Bertman 1998) with the lack of time and the (obsessive) seeking for something new and with the renegotiation of the meaning of our fundamental references. In the liquid-modern "society of consumers," Bauman (2016, 21) described the transition from linear to "pointillist time" […] "broken up into a multitude of separate morsels, each morsel reduced to a point ever more closely approximating its geometrical idealization of non-dimensionality."

Migration and the advent of increasingly *multi-ethnic and multicultural societies* also contribute to several drastic changes (Bauman, Portera, and Mazzeo 2021). The emergence of a single market on a world scale, the concentration and internationalization of capital, and the persistent *economic wars* between nation States have caused an imbalance of wealth with consequences also of a political and social nature. Furthermore, the phenomenon of *neoliberalism*, has been considered as a shift towards dehumanizing ways of life. Schools and universities, traditionally spaces for education, culture, and democracy, are becoming more and more mere places of "performance and efficiency" (Giroux and Giroux 2006, 24) that promote excessive individualism (loss of the ability to perceive oneself as a part of social group with common humanity), indifference (toward needs and sufferings of plants, animals, and other human beings), competition (the detriment of cooperation), reductionism of complex phenomena and problems (experts in details, unable to grasp links), standardization (little or no consideration of individual and social differences and inequalities), and the promotion of a culture of *I don't care* (see also Portera 2016).

In the professional encounter, especially in educational and psychological fields, radical changes have also arisen. Teachers, mediators, counselors, and psychotherapists who are applying their own methods and practices (often unintentionally in ethnocentric ways) are facing new challenges. The encounter with people who hold different beliefs, values, behaviors, and *Weltanschauung*, complicate professional helping relationships. Language barriers, different communication styles, expectations, and understandings of problems become an obstacle, which leads to insecurities and new conflicts (Portera, Moodley, and Milani 2020). Here the central question refers to the forms of intervention in the field of mediation: How should traditional approaches be modified to deal with the new challenges?

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Agostino Portera

Conflict and mediation

Conflict is inevitable in human life. The phylogenetic and ontogenetic development of the human being is inexorably linked with the presence of conflict. In order to live, we are *condemned* to destroy the lives of others. This is one of the deepest and ineluctable conflicts of human beings; "Am I indebted to being? Being, persisting in being, do I not kill? Being in the world, do I not take the place of someone else?" questioned Emmanuel Lévinas (1984, 148).

The concepts of *conflict* and *aggression* have been faced from the human sciences, especially sociology and psychology, as well as biology and ethology. Lately, they are also finding more and more attention in education. Historically, almost all disciplines have considered human aggression from a purely negative point of view, especially considering the tremendous damage it has caused. It was mainly thanks to psychology, in particular to the schools of psychotherapy, that the best conditions for the development of personality were understood in the ability to evaluate and positively address conflicts. For many years the educational visions have been predominantly conditioned by disruptive and often destructive forces associated with human aggression (Galtung 1996; Shultz 2007).

Etymologically, the word *aggression* refers to the Latin etymon *ad* and *gradi* (to go). In Latin, *ad* could also mean *against*: In this case it could actually refer to that negative aggressiveness (assault, destroy) of which Western literature is wedged. But *ad* may also indicate a positive attitude: *Towards*, which means growth, vitality, moving towards a goal in a secure way, attacking a problem (Fromm 1994). Therefore, in mediation it is necessary to start from the assumption that, despite some '*pacifistic utopias,*' basic aggressiveness is an ineliminable tendency of humans, which can neither be fully repressed nor allowed to be manifested in violent, uncontrolled, and destructive ways. Further, the term *conflict* comes from the Latin *conflictus*, from the verb *confligere*, which means *to bump, to bump against*. This is the common understanding of conflict as confrontation. The classical political thought of Plato and Aristotle was based on an idea of a society characterized by order and harmony where conflict was an imbalance of the natural condition: A pathological state of disharmony. A carefully study of its etymology reveals that *conflictus* can also take on the meaning of bringing together—aiming at an encounter. Machiavelli and Hobbes subvert the traditional conception of man and society, by developing an *anthropology of conflict*, where conflict is seen as the natural condition of the individual, which can only be regulated and managed through the exercise of reason, the only way of channeling man's passions and selfish spirit (Arielli and Scotto 1998, 5–9).

Today, globalization and the advent of pluralistic and multicultural societies imply not only an increase in conflict, but also add to it many novel aspects, especially on the level of communication. Therefore, especially in intercultural mediation, it is essential to reverse this trend and to begin considering conflict and aggression as unavoidable factors of human existence. The challenge consists in recognizing them in their specific entity (their disruptive and propulsive part) and learning to manage them in the most appropriate way both for the individual and for the community.

Among the positive aspects of the conflict, Johnson and Johnson (1995) indicate the intellectual stimulus (the capacity of reflection, reasoning, and *heterocentration*), as well as the promotion of a more intense and meaningful relationship with others. The scope of a positive mediation is to make conflicts explicit, by correctly identifying their nature, reasons, and background. At a closer look, conflicts can involve multiple levels, including some visible and others hidden, like positions, interests, personality problems, and significant past experiences (Besemer 1999). Conflicts also have several possible backgrounds, like the coexistence of different interests or needs, the involvement of hurt feelings, and the presence of disturbed relationships. Moreover, especially in multicultural settings, at the basis of a conflict there may be misunderstandings, communication problems, and a lack of information. In other cases, there might be structural conditions, environmental factors, economic injustice, or political oppression (see also Mitchell 1981). Nowadays, *mediation* is considered as a highly effective method of conflict management and is applied in many fields, from family mediation to school

mediation, from law to economic, from health care to political international negotiations. In industrialized societies, especially in the West, discussion, argument, and negotiation are used as the main strategies of conflict resolution. Although *discussion* and *argumentation* have considerable advantages, they are based on thinking in terms of contrasts, which provokes the polarization of the conflict: Usually, one part wins, the other loses; the stronger point of view is imposed, not necessarily the better one. The risk of such a method is that the *fronts* become increasingly rigid; no new ideas are developed; time, energy, costs, and creativity are used only to weaken and overcome the ideas of others. Even the technique of *negotiation*, aimed at *compromise*, presents the risk of acting only within some limits, instead of seeking solutions in a creative way. If practitioners too overly focus on solving a given problem, they run the risk of seeing only a single and rather superficial cause, and thereby ignoring everything else; often because it is the easiest one to discover. Mediation instead wants to pass from fights to solutions. The method allows finding a solution, aims at promoting clients' communication and growth, so that they will be able to develop new solutions autonomously (De Bono 1989). In mediation, all interests are taken into account; people are acknowledged as distinctive from factual problems; it is possible to reflect about different possibilities of action before deciding what to do; all *truths* (all points of view) are considered; the union of means and purpose is practiced; only objectives valid for all parties are pursued; power is used not against others, but to achieve common goals (Folberg and Taylor 1984; Bercovitch, Anagnoson, and Wille 1991). At the root of mediation, in particular if intercultural, there is the awareness that: a) conflict is not negative in itself, only unresolved conflicts are dangerous; b) many conflicts arise from the difficulty of solving a problem, not from a lack of will to solve it; c) the best decisions about a conflict are those made by the parties involved; d) those who have reached an agreement are more respectful of the decisions if they themselves contributed to its achievement and if they accept the process that led to the agreement. Through successful mediation, conflicts can develop as opportunities for growth and enrichment. Rather than entrusting responsibility to specialists (such as lawyers or psychotherapists), even in the presence of an expert, the parties to the dispute maintain control of the problem. Instead of leaving room for the devastating forces of a destructive quarrel, participants can take responsibility and deal constructively with conflicts. Mediators, in their role as impartial third parties, can interrupt the process of escalation of conflicts and show participants the way to reach constructive solutions. Clients' attitudes towards a struggle to the bitter end, thinking in categories and defeating victory, can be transformed into mutual advantage towards creative solutions that take into account the interests of all the parties involved. By resolving conflicts without the use of power, force or violence, mediation can not only help to solve present difficulties, but can also prevent future problems, through promoting constructive solution-seeking, improving mutual relations, and developing lifelong conflict management skills (Mayer 2006).

In his research on the institutional barriers and critical factors that have hindered the quality of the relationship and the success in the management of conflicts in multicultural fields in Italy, Portera (2013) has identified difficulties between colleagues and among families with children of foreign origin because of a lack of time and/or reflectivity. In conflict situations, several teachers used communicative forms characterized by stigmatization, stereotypes, and prejudices. In the *health* sector (and similar in the business and law sectors), many conflicts arose for the lack of shared (or target) language (and use of relatives as translators) and the limited time available compared to the high number of tasks and roles required. Further barriers were the ethnocentric attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices and also the poor (or absence) investment in intercultural training. With regard specifically to (intercultural) *mediation*, many practitioners found it difficult to identify tasks and boundaries of their work.

Intercultural mediation

Globalization, multicultural societies, and economic, political, and cultural interdependence are raising relevant questions for mediation. In countries with greater immigration, such as the United States,

Canada, and Australia, many new approaches and models have been developed (Moodley 1999). Portera (2020, 10–30) has summarized and analyzed the most relevant approaches to culture mentioned above. Four main directions have been recognized: Metacultural, transcultural, multicultural, and intercultural.

1 A first group of interventions could be described as *metacultural*. The term *meta-culture* refers to a *culture over the culture*, a *supra culture* (such as metaphysics in relation to physics or meta-communication in relation to communication). This group includes all forms of intervention aiming to work with clients, without taking into account the cultural differences, and without 'changing the culture' of people with an immigration background (Moodley 1999, 6). In my opinion, this assumption is faulty and misleading. No interpersonal encounter (above all mediation) can take place without changes in culturally related beliefs and behavior. Norms, values, and rules are involved in any interpersonal and professional encounter. Therefore, the metacultural model can be considered as inadequate and potentially dangerous, because it leads to assume that effective mediation can be conducted without a consideration of the clients' culture.
2 The second group of interventions could be associated with the term *transculture*. Generally, *cross-cultural* or transcultural strategies are based on universalism and are aimed at the development of universal and common characteristics, values (e.g., respect, honesty, autonomy), and concepts (e.g., peace, justice, environmental protection). In the psychiatric and psychological field, the transcultural approach was mostly applied by using ones' own method also for the treatment of people from foreign countries (an example is ethno-psychoanalysis by Devereux (1992) or Nathan (1993)). Although in mediation the transcultural approach brings many advantages, there are also several limitations: It could lead to a uniform view of the world while in reality it is very heterogenous. There is a risk of regarding one's own values, norms, and rules as universal, and to impose one's own values and *Weltanschauung*. Furthermore, this approach builds upon a static view of culture. So, its application could encourage an assimilationist orientation towards minorities. Instead, in the mediation field, all treatment methods should be considered as having deep cultural roots (having been developed and applied in a certain time and in a specific cultural background). They all contain their own rules, norms, and values, and reflect their own understandings of conflicts, disease, illness, and adequate treatment. Since as human beings we cannot be neutral, especially in the asymmetric professional settings. Mediators may thus run the risk of imposing (often unwittingly) their own thinking patterns on their clients.
3 A third group of interventions could be described as *multicultural*. These models are based on a philosophical orientation of cultural relativism, which emphasizes the uniqueness of every culture, and every culture's right to autonomy. Multiculturalism, aimed at a peaceful co-existence, in mediation shows many advantages. Strangeness is respected, and foreigners and immigrants are agreed the same rights as the locals. Moving through an ethnic awareness can lead to the strengthening of personal and cultural identity, with an overall positive development for the clients. Further, proper consideration of the physical and cultural differences and knowledge in relation to other cultures, languages or religions can help professionals to overcome many obstacles to understand culture-specific explanations of conflicts and attempts of solutions. In spite of the advantages of the multicultural perspective, mediators may risk adopting a homogeneous (nationalistic) view of cultures, which results in static and rigid thinking, with the danger of developing stereotypes and prejudices. The question remains open whether mediators should act as experts for their field across all cultures or if they shall only work with clients from their own country. In addition, by overly stressing cultural differences, many other important aspects of the clients' problems could be ignored (like vulnerability factors, marginalization, isolation, political and legal discrimination, poverty). And some deviant

behavior (such as hyperactivity or depression) could be misinterpreted as culture-specific behavior (spirited or shy).

4 A fourth group of interventions, in my opinion the most appropriate, is called *intercultural*. Although the term *intercultural* was previously used in the USA with a different meaning the intercultural approach was developed in Europe. The word *intercultural education* was first used in the USA in the early 1930. However, its strategies focused on assimilation and often ended in segregation and discrimination (McGee Banks 2011). The intercultural approach, in my opinion, represents a new 'Copernican' revolution (Portera 2010) because concepts like identity or culture are no longer considered as static but as dynamic. Further, emigration and life in a pluralistic and multicultural society are viewed not only as risk factors for disorders but also as opportunities for enrichment and personal and social development. Epistemologically, the intercultural approach includes all the positive aspects of universalism and relativism (by recognizing its limits) and adds something new. Beyond understanding and respecting differences (multicultural) and removing injustice by recognizing communal laws and roles (transcultural), it includes also the opportunity for genuine interaction, which means change through encounter, dialogue, confrontation, and conflict resolution. In the fields of mediation, the use of the intercultural approach involves overcoming the static and hierarchic conception of culture. The encounter with the foreigners is considered as an opportunity for dialogue, confrontation, and a positive change. Such positive development can best occur through the promotion of real communication, contact, encounters, and interaction. Clients with different cultural backgrounds are not (directly or indirectly) *forced* into singular elements of their cultural identities (which hides some dangers, especially for adolescents; Portera 1995). The professional encounter with the clients provides the possibility of open reflection and comparison of some culturally rooted concepts, ideas, and pre-judgments. Self-conceptualization can be reconsidered and (if wrong or maladaptive) changed through the assumption of a more dynamic and interactive way of thinking.

Intercultural mediation in Europe

In Europe, since the Treaty of Amsterdam (European Communities 1997), the inclusion of immigrants has been considered as the *first pillar*. The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008 (European Commission. Directorate-General for Education and Culture 2009) affirmed the "multicultural character of many countries" and the need for intercultural dialogue. Until today, intercultural mediation (IM) has been considered to be the most promising approach for inclusion and conflict management. IM is considered as an opportunity for individuals and cultural groups to cease living in isolation. Interpreting means that translators focus on what is said during interpersonal encounters and that they primarily focus on language structure but not on the inner meanings of a message. Intercultural mediation instead precisely emphasizes on cultural meanings and focuses on communication by combining elements from psychology, sociology, science of communication, and political science. It can be considered as a bridging of cultures and meanings (Wieviorka 2003).

After the most recent WHO report (Verrept 2019), intercultural mediators are highly effective in bridging linguistic and cultural barriers and are also indispensable to high-quality, comprehensive healthcare service for refugees and migrants. A comprehensive WHO literature review between August 2018 and January 2019 found that in healthcare systems, intercultural mediators are employed with the aim of reducing cultural and linguistic barriers and increasing the accessibility and quality of health care for refugees and migrants. Unfortunately, so far, no review of their roles or evaluation of their effectiveness have been published. In the 17 member states of the WHO European Region "intercultural mediation is a precarious, temporary occupation with an uncertain income" (Verrept 2019, VIII).

Another systematic literature review (Portera, Trevisan, and Milani 2020), focused on books and articles published in peer-reviewed journals, documents the high attractiveness that is ascribed do intercultural mediation in Europe. However, it remains unclear what intercultural mediation means and how it should be structured and supported as a profession. Across the 47 studies, different ideas about intercultural mediation were found. Many of these conceptual articles did not build on previous findings and definitions or even acknowledge previously published works. Nowadays, in Europe, most of the literature on IM refers to linguistic, translation, and interpreting (Dasli 2011; Liddicoat 2016). There are also notable works in the field of law and arbitration (Adeline and Hausmann 2009), economic relations (Broszkiewicz 2018), political conflicts, health care (Verrept 2019), family mediation (Nylund, Ervasti, and Adrian 2018), as well as school mediation (Catarci and Fiorucci 2020).

Considering the above results, in my opinion there is no particular method that is indicated for IM. Every approach shows positive aspects and limitations. Rather than identifying a particular approach as the most appropriate one, it is now more important to reflect on how traditional methods need to be improved by application in different cultural settings (Portera 2020). However, some elements must be considered necessary: First, an effective intervention in IM should necessarily recognize the *needs* of the clients. In previous research, I tried to identify the positive outcomes and opportunities, as well as the risks related with migration and living in a multicultural context (Portera 1995 and 1998). The method was a longitudinal, qualitative case study with 23 young people of Italian origin in Germany.

The study has identified several *main risk factors*, which are sudden, unprepared separation; frequent journeys between Germany and Italy; ambivalent behavior (especially that resulting from conflicting messages from school and family); social marginality and practical problems (debt, marginality, insufficient legal security); discrimination and stigmatization from peers or adults; isolation and loneliness; language problems; and strict upbringing (more than in the country of origin). It has additionally identified the following *protective factors*: Establishing a firm and secure relationship with a person of reference during childhood; parents' openness towards the German environment; parents' understanding and trust; readiness for separation; positive experience of acceptance and respect in the host country; understanding from teachers and educators; no pressure to assimilation; role of friends as a *bridge* between the cultures; external support also through counseling or therapy.

Furthermore, the study has also identified the most appropriate coping strategies. In many cases, the interviewed adolescents adopted coping strategies (e.g., passivity, submission) that were appropriate for solving conflicts in the country of origin or in the family, but not at school or in German society (Portera 1995, 211–2). On this basis, a theory of *fundamental needs of human development* has been developed, which takes into account the effects of globalization and life in the multicultural context. This theory is mainly based on the work of Maslow (1954), but also considering other psychological theories, mainly Rogers (1961) and Erikson (1968). The most important needs were: Physical well-being (metabolism, nutrition, sleep); social relations and sense of belonging (to feel part of a group, to feel similar to others and to interact with them); social bonds (to create a close relationship, with at least one main person of reference, possibly but not necessarily the mother); separation (to develop full autonomy); positive emotional regard (acknowledgment, respect, and acceptance), deep understanding (empathy), and congruence; trust (to oneself and to the external world); active participation (to live one's own life as a protagonist and not as a dominated); structure (clear, determined and reliable limits for orientation); continuity (internalize stable criteria for evaluating the external world; and not to be forced to remove or deny parts of one's own cultural standards, in order to be accepted). In a successive step, based on the research results, I also illustrated some correlations between fundamental needs, conflicts, and the development of psychic disturbances and disorders (Portera 1999) and also the implications for psychological support (Portera 2010). Next to considering risk, protective factors and fundamental needs, mediators need also to acquire intercultural competences (IC). Recently the *Centre for Intercultural Studies* in Verona carried out a study on intercultural competences needed in education, counseling, and mediation (Portera 2017). The results were used to develop a model of IC, which

underlines its interactive aspects. This model places an *Area of the Self* in its center containing attitudes (like openness, sensitivity, decentralization, curiosity, humility, flexibility, respect, responsibility, critical thinking, acceptance, empathy, and congruence). In the model, this *Area of the Self* is surrounded by several different categories of *Knowledge* (awareness of the cultural self, knowledge of one's own culture and the culture of others), verbal-linguistic, nonverbal and paraverbal knowledge, disciplinary, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary knowledge) and *skills*, including linguistic and communicative skills, observation, analyzing and interpreting subjective reality, establishing positive relationships, building stable and trustful relationships, etc. Subsequently, Portera (2020) has validated the aforementioned model using the Delphi method. As a result, a new model of IC has been developed, which transcends the Eurocentric or North American conceptualization of IC and include competences rooted in Eastern traditions, mentioned in the philosophies of *Taoism* (like the importance of not rigidly dividing the world and persons) and *Chakra* (considering aspects like the divine or rooting in reality).

Final thoughts

Conflict is always a part of our lives. We will also need to discover its positive aspects:

> If you cannot remove conflict from life, why not adjust your thinking about it? If you can't beat it, join it. Why not try and see conflict as the salt of life, as a big energizer, the tickler, the tantalizer, rather than a bothersome nuisance, as a noise in a perfect channel, as disturbing ripples in otherwise quiet water! Why not treat conflict as a form of life? Particularly since we all know that it is precisely during the periods in our lives when we are exposed to a conflict that really challenges us. It is when we finally are able to master, that we feel most alive.
>
> *(Galtung 1975–80, Vol. 3: 501)*

Intercultural mediation, if properly intended as the facilitation of communication between persons with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, may constitute a great help for adequately recognizing and for learning to manage conflicts in appropriate and constructive ways.

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