

The Relevance of Narrative Mediation to Working with Conflict in South Africa

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the value of narrative mediation as an effective approach to working with conflict, with particular reference to South Africa as a transforming nation. The paper will begin by offering a perspective on conflict and mediation, with emphasis on how narrative mediation differs from the predominant interest-based approach to mediation. This will be followed by an illustration of the key components of narrative mediation and the capacity of this approach to meet the challenges of working with conflict in South Africa.

2. Conflict and mediation

Conflict is not an event in and of itself. It arises from the inter-relationship between parties who share a history and ripples through many aspects of their lives. This history is both immediate and contextual in that wider social, economic and political factors shape our relationships, and our conflicts, in particular ways.

Dominant discourses around race, class and gender influence conflict and operations of power position people and groups in unequal power relationships. These inequalities infuse with cultural practices that influence how people deal with conflict. Moral decision-making is very much alive in conflict situations as parties concentrate on perceived rights and wrongs. Interactions are also characterised by blame and shame.

Parties seek mediation because they recognise that they need a third person to facilitate their conflict resolution through a safe and contained process. The purpose of mediation is to manage the display of hostile emotions and to work with power by addressing the relational conflict between parties. Narrative mediation achieves this by creating an understanding amongst parties of the

cultural factors that are impacting their conflicts and the implications of the conflict for their respective lives.

This perspective stands in contrast with structuralism - the rationale behind interest-based mediation - whereby identity and behaviour are seen to arise from 'within' human beings and conflict is seen as the outcome of needs not being met. Whereas interest-based mediation focuses on the problem, identifies aggravators and alleviators, and the essential cause of conflict, narrative mediation concerns itself with the network of relationships that fall beneath the shadows that conflict casts (Winslade and Monk, 2008). Instead of isolating two parties at the centre of the conflict, it considers the actions of everyone who has a stake in the conflict as well as the outcome of the resolution process.

Narrative mediation addresses the imbalance of power between the two parties at the centre of the conflict by including other voices (ibid). This emphasis on conflict as a contest over entitlement separates the conflict from a person's psychological make-up. The positions that people adopt in conflict situations are understood to be socially constructed.

The mediator occupies a de-centred position and taps into parties' own worldviews and local expertise. Parties consider what they would like their preferred relationship to look like and what needs to be put into place for it to evolve. It remains, however, *their* process and mediators occupy privileged positions as witnesses to the stories people share about their experiences of the conflict. This privilege is accompanied by responsibility and accountability as mediators (ibid).

Whereas interest-based mediation works towards a resolution as the outcome of the process, narrative mediation views the resolution as the foundation for the way forward. Emphasis is therefore placed on how parties will translate the insights that have emerged from the mediation into a new story of relationship.

3. Narrative mediation

Working from Flacks' (1990) definition of power as the capacity to influence the conditions and terms of the everyday life of a community or society, any practice aimed at transformation and empowerment must both challenge historical forces and contribute to the future. Power relations are therefore located at the centre of narrative mediation.

The approach is informed by narrative family therapy (White and Epston, 1990, 1992) which takes the poststructuralist view that identity is socially constructed and not intrinsic to the individual. This concern with how individuals mediate the worlds they inhabit stems from the belief that "one of the primary ways human beings make sense of their experience is by casting it in a narrative form" (Gee, in Mishler, 1986, p. 67). People, as social beings, organise their experiences in terms of stories and each story arranges experience into temporally meaningful episodes. We use language to speak and story ourselves into meaning, and this sense-making process provides a structure for thinking, perception, imagination and moral decision-making (Sarbin, 1986).

The belief that our lives are shaped by the stories people tell about us and the stories we tell ourselves makes story a comfortable medium to work with. People grow up amidst a variety of competing narratives that shape how they see themselves and others in the world. We constantly tell stories about ourselves and others. By acting both out of and into these stories, people shape the direction of the unfolding story-line (Winslade and Monk, 2000).

In narrative mediation, the entire mediation is essentially viewed as a story-telling process. It is a departure from the interest-based approach that endeavours to reach resolution in the context of win/win and separates the process from the content. Mediation typically involves individuals' sharing accounts of the conflict, brainstorming issues and negotiating agreements (Dunn, 2004).

Narrative mediation instead focuses on the context of the conflict and attempts to understand how relationships have become overwhelmed by conflict. It attempts to uncover a variety of conflict stories as typically stories of conflict narrowly cast the self in the role of victim and protagonist, and the other party in the role of victimiser and antagonist. Mediators destabilise these perceptions by first listening to how both parties see the conflict and the world, and how the world sees them, and then paving the way for new interpretations (Winslade and Monk, 2008).

They listen out for points of resistance when parties stood up against the conflict or times when the relationship was not consumed by conflict. This includes sensitivity towards what parties are implicitly saying 'yes' to when they adopt strong antagonistic positions. Mediators attempt to create a safe place where retribution is replaced by restoration and an appreciation for diversity and relationship building. The pain and hurt of the conflict is attributed to the conflict itself and not to the parties. People experience a non-threatening culturally-sensitive environment in which they can share their experiences of the conflict and actively work towards its resolution.

3.1. In search of meaning not 'truth value'

Dominating discourses are ideas and beliefs that operate as truths, informing our actions in the world (Carey, in Dunn, 2004). They serve as a map against which we understand our own and others' thought, language, action and interaction (Gee, 1999). As such, discourses are both mental attributes and social practices. Conflict stories reflect cultural discourses that inform how people have approached the conflict in the first instance.

We are all members of a variety of discourses (for example, gender; class; race; family) and we use discourses to explain our behaviour in the world, as well as the behaviour of others (ibid). Discourses change over time and people alter the way they see themselves in line with changing discourses. When we excuse or justify seemingly inappropriate behaviour, our explanations are informed by discourses (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

Cultural discourses are shaped by those who hold power and dominant discourses inform how we behave and feel in conflict situations. The meaning that we give to the situation is reflected in the positions that we adopt in relation to the conflict. The constructivist perspective on culture does not regard people as belonging to distinct groups or categories of people with discrete assumptions that demarcate each group.

This cookie-cutter view is replaced by a perspective on culture as a fluid process whereby people ascribe meaning to their experiences and adopt contradictory positions in response to multiple cultural narratives. These background cultural narratives are therefore both restraining and compelling in their shaping of peoples' experiences of conflict (Winslade and Monk, 2008).

Peoples' accounts of the conflict they are experiencing are therefore infused with discourses. The role of the narrative mediator is to create an awareness of how discourses shape these understandings. A dominant cultural discourse is the belief that we need authoritative individuals with professional knowledge to identify and work through the problems that have given rise to conflict, and to determine which party is right and which party is wrong (Dunn, 2004). The social inequalities that have informed the conflict are entirely overlooked and parties are not empowered to actively resolve their ongoing difficulties.

By emphasising the relational domain, narrative mediation frames conflict in terms of a socially constructed contest over entitlement. This entitlement is informed by the meaning given to discourses that operate to privilege the voices of those who are seen to hold the power over those who do not (Dunn, 2004). For example, western knowledge is propped up to the neglect of African viewpoints; managerial perspectives are held in higher esteem than the views of workers.

Conflict when viewed in this light is no longer seen as the outcome of unmet interests or needs. The question is not about who is right and who is wrong. Rather, it asks how the meanings given to the conflict relate to the shared understanding of what a more preferred relationship would look like (ibid). It is through the telling and linking of meaning between the teller and larger stories of the community to which he/she belongs that this consensus is reached.

Narrative mediation privileges the person's own understanding of his/her story over the 'facts'. The value of the story lies in its telling and interpretation, essentially how the teller understands the impact of the story on his/her life. This emphasis on how stories create reality means that events can not be understood separately from the dominant narratives that are held by both teller and listener. It is not the role of the mediator to deduce the 'truth-value' of the stories. The pursuit of truth is seen as an irrelevant endeavour and the focus is on how stories construct the world rather than how they exist independently prior to description.

3.2. The role of the narrative mediator

By viewing people as experts of their own lives, narrative mediation is respectful and non-blaming. Problems are seen as separate from people and it is assumed that people possess the capacities and commitment to work through their own difficulties. Problems tend to objectify people and their own voices become lost in an interaction that is saturated with blame and shame. The repositioning of parties in relation to one another through externalised conversations helps them to detach from blame and shame. It aims to create a relationship between the disputing parties that is based on trust, to develop an understanding of how the past has impacted on the present, and to construct a joint narrative with solutions for the way forward (Dunn, 2004).

The mediator holds competing discourses of entitlement to enable parties to reflect on their own actions and positions. The goal is to co-author stories that highlight strengths and competencies rather than the conflict, and to help

people to get in touch with their preferred realities and how to achieve them. The mediator encourages people to access their intentions and purpose so that they can work through obstacles that have got in the way of a more preferred relationship. This is achieved by creating distance between the parties and the conflict so that the conflict becomes externalised and people can then reflect on the nature and rationale behind the positions they have adopted.

From the onset the mediator elicits peoples' hopes and intentions for the mediation and does not focus on the problem. The conflict is then externalised by naming it and exploring the effects of the conflict on peoples' lives and relationships. Once parties start to consider how they have contributed towards the conflict and how it has impacted on their own lives as well as the lives of others, they are able to identify restraints to moving forward.

This focus on the conflict, and not each other, opens up the narrow story of conflict and allows for the creation of an alternative story that emphasises the way forward. Throughout the process the mediator traces the discourses in the many contexts of life that have allowed the conflict to come about and 'double listens' for alternative stories.

It is important that the mediator remains aware of his/her own pull from background narratives so that he/she engages with parties as even-handedly as possible. Mediators need to be conscious of the multiple discourses that shape their own lives and how they use language to invite others into relational positions. The kinds of questions that they ask are constrained by their own cultural locations (Winslade and Monk, 2000).

The positioning of parties as experts over their own lives is the first step in destabilising the rank and power that is infused with the mediators' role. The mediator co-narrates the stories because his/ her own interpretation of the conflict guides the line of enquiry and thus contributes towards how parties understand the conflict. Redekop (2004) asserts that the mediator cannot step out of the narrative just as a fish cannot step out of water. Instead the

mediator must remain conscious of his/ her own narrative, and share it with parties in a way which “invites an alignment of narratives, in order to create a new, transformative narrative that they can share” (ibid. p. 1).

Redekop also cautions that the mediator must be careful not to step out of the conflict story to adopt an analytical stance. It is the mediator’s own understanding of peoples’ experiences in terms of stories that helps parties to realign their narratives in meaningful ways. The mediator must be aware of how his/her own construction of the mediation process, as informed by his/her own beliefs, shapes the conversation and significantly influences the outcome.

The centrality of story-telling involves the mediator in a process of assisting people to uncover their numerous understandings of the conflict. The process invariably shapes the content that emerges, and also privileges some content over others. This recognition of the connection between content and process negates any notions of neutrality on the part of the mediator. This explains why the narrative approach is frequently described as a way of being, rather than a technique.

4. The mediation process - linking content and process

The mediation comprises three broad stages. They are not distinct as the mediator typically moves between stages. The mediation commences with the ‘engagement phase’ whereby attention is placed on re-establishing the relationship between parties by eliciting their hopes and intentions for the process. Stories of conflict are opened through ‘expressions of curiosity’ whereby the mediator enquires into the history of the conflict and its effects on the lives of parties.

The value of tracing the origin of the conflict is based on the belief that people in conflict with one another are likely to have had experiences that were not completely dominated by the conflict. The historical perspective reveals the rhythm and pattern of the conflict and helps people to gain clarity about how

the conflict is changing and possibly escalating. It also opens the space for the mediator to ask about experiences that exist beyond the conflict, thus opening possibilities for mutual trust (ibid).

The mediator operates from the assumption that the conflict story is one story amongst many stories and that in the shadows of the conflict story of angry exchanges there are moments of reflection, remorse, calm and hope. The problem-saturated story frequently frames the opposing partner in a one dimensional, fixed way and is held as the only 'true' description of the events of the conflict (Winslade and Monk, 2000). People also fit their disputes into familiar story-lines e.g. punitive boss; school bully and when the story shifts, the person's position in the story shifts (Dunn, 2004). Assumptions about personal deficiencies are redirected towards understanding how conflict impacts on peoples' lives and relationships, thus positioning both parties in opposition to the conflict.

The mediator then moves into the 'deconstruction' stage whereby the conflict is objectified and named. Once this distance between parties and their conflict is created, the mediator begins to explore how discourses have allowed conflict to consume the relationship (Dunn, 2004). These 'externalising conversations' involve deconstructing the problem-saturated story (how parties describe the conflict) in order to pull apart old and familiar ways of thinking to create space for new, alternative stories. The mediator listens for how the discursive positioning of parties has allowed conflict to consume the relationship and how the pattern of the conflict has at times become disrupted by a counterplot of cooperation (Winslade and Monk, 2008). This attention to how parties themselves have influenced the conflict further unites parties against the conflict-saturated story.

When mediators engage in 'double listening' they open up the problem-story by situating people in multiple story lines – the conflict-saturated story and the alternative relationship story. They acknowledge anger and listen out for experiences that are glossed over, asking questions that reveal peoples' value positions. As a more trusting dialogue emerges, participants begin to

hear one another's story of the problem and its effects, and to reflect on both the position they have taken and the relationship they have with the problem. They begin to identify times of agreement in relation to the problem-saturated story and also moments when the problem has not fully taken over the relationship (Dunn, 2004). These insights help to further articulate the preferred story of relationship that is in harmony with the hopes and goals of all participants.

When people feel hurt from the actions of others, they channel a lot of energy into reworking the conflict story in such a way that reinforces their own feeling of injustice. The mediator uses externalising descriptions to focus parties on the impact of the conflict without becoming overwhelmed by perceived character flaws and blaming. This also allows the mediator to grasp the meaning of their distress without appearing to conspire with one party's problem-saturated description over the other (ibid).

The preferred story that emerges must be held by the mediator as parties begin to disengage from totalising descriptions of each other as hurtful and destructive. A key task of the mediator at this point is to create contexts in which parties have opportunities to reflect on and examine their positions.

This final 'construction' stage creates opportunities for parties to not only reflect on the positions but also to shift them. By reflecting on the changes they are making to their relationship, parties begin to support the growth of the alternate story. This re-negotiation of meaning builds a narrative that no longer fits with the conflict story, thus allowing the co-authorship of the preferred story of relationship (Dunn, 1994).

A new solution-bound narrative is then woven out of the conflict story as parties map out the territory from which ways out of the conflict will be found. The new story must be knitted into wider relationships and organisations and this is often achieved through the inclusion of voices belonging to those individuals who have also been affected by the conflict, for example co-workers or children.

The integration of the new story into people's lives is encouraged by asking people to reflect on how they are able to work so well together, and to identify some of the relational strengths that are emerging (Winslade and Monk, 2000). Follow-up sessions in which parties reflect on the problem-solving abilities that they have developed provide valuable opportunities to build on the new story and to strengthen the relationship.

The re-authorship of the story of relationship does not therefore aim to simply reach agreement. This is seen as too limiting. The mediator takes a future orientation by assisting the parties to find ways to meet their respective needs or interests in relation to the conflict. The purpose is to empower individuals by encouraging them to find a wide range of outcomes that are constructed in terms of a story. The story moves through time as people must know how to go on. Progress is recorded and narrative letters provide an effective means to sustain this development by tracking unique outcomes and documenting the counterplot of cooperation over time.

5. Organisational stories

Stories are held in institutional memory and stories of conflict have social capital within organisations. Discourses hold organisational structures and functions in place as they pervade management thinking and define relationships. Privileged voices are typically based on hierarchy; professional qualifications and length of time with the organization (Dunn, 2004). When mediations illustrate how dominant cultural discourses can entrap people into particular behaviours, that in turn influence the nature and direction of the conflict, they open up new cultural possibilities for the organisation.

Changing discourses lead to shifts in organisational structures and functions and it is therefore essential that the alternative stories that emerge are woven into organisations. For example, management and communication styles may need to be revised. One of the ways in which alternative stories of conflict are embedded within organisations is through 'outsider witness practices.'

Drawing from the work of anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff, witnesses from the community of parties to the conflict are invited to the mediation process. These may include fellow workers, family friends, or anyone that has a stake in the conflict.

The viability of any organisational culture is its capacity to resolve conflicts and renegotiate communal meanings (Winslade and Monk, 2008). The mediator therefore facilitates the sharing of stories in ways that encourage people to jointly create new meanings. A reflexive climate is created whereby stories of conflict are told, listened to, reflected on and retold. Relationships are acknowledged and people realise how their lives are connected around shared issues and themes. When personal stories are enriched through the reflections of others, conflict stories start to loosen their hold.

The emphasis is on creating a context for rich story development that “acknowledges and re-grades peoples’ lives, in contrast to many rituals of contemporary culture that judge and degrade people’s lives” (White, 2007, p. 165). This restorative approach brings together everyone who has been negatively impacted by the conflict or actions of specific offenders. The emphasis on personal and relational strengths, rather than the conflict itself, maps the effects of the conflict with a view to building motivation and action. Offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and to find ways to make amends.

The resolution of conflict through communal discussion of problems; their impact and how to move forward is not uncommon on the African continent. A rich tradition of social forms and cultural traditions for working through conflicts can be traced back to pre-colonial times. The *lekgotla*, as an institution of conflict management, is communal in nature and involves the entire society in the resolution of conflict (Masina, 2000).

The concept of *ubuntu* whereby human existence is seen as unified, inter-connected and integrated underpins this approach. Contrary to western

individualism, *ubuntu* asserts that a person is only a person through others and emphasises that problems can only be solved if they are worked through together (ibid). It rejects the polarities of right and wrong and challenges the win/lose tactics and clearly defined structures and procedures that typify western conflict resolution processes.

Despite the systematic eradication of communal and family life under apartheid, social systems based on *ubuntu* principles have survived. It therefore becomes our responsibility to uncover how dominant discourses elevate Eurocentric perspectives above indigenous practices, and to give expression to the vast local knowledge that exists.

6. Narrative mediation in the South African context

As a country in transition, South Africa faces the ongoing challenge of how to generate and maintain processes that restore dignity, create political and economic equality, and promote a culture of human rights (Doxtader and Villa-Valencio, 2004). The 1994 elections signalled a crucial turning point in the history of South Africa through the abolishment of race as a means to organise society and thus laid the foundation for political equality (Daniel, Southall and Lutchman, 2005).

The result of this juncture, fifteen years later, is that South Africa today is a fundamentally improved country. There remain, however, extensive social and economic inequalities that require redress. The demands of productivity that call for efficiency and speed to the neglect of human and social well-being sadly predominate. As practitioners in the field of conflict resolution, we are frequently called on to expedite quick and effective 'solutions' to problems.

People and their conflicts represent broad social issues and we therefore face the challenge of how to design mediation processes that will forge effective resolutions to social conflicts and drive the transformation agenda forward. Narrative mediation operates in the realm of social justice as it bridges the

gap between micro (individual experiences/ stories) and macro (dominant social discourses) level change.

The creation of a mediation practice that advances social cohesion based on justice must also tackle the wider context of social and economic conditions that underlie inequality and exclusion (De Feyter, 2005). Narrative mediation has the capacity to achieve this as it extends the understanding of conflict into social, political and economic realms by incorporating wider discourses of culture and power. When applied to the field of labour relations, it has the potential to ameliorate relations between labour and management that are historically steeped in distrust.

Restorative justice processes that aim to restore social equity and to transform the fabric of South African society are integral to the narrative approach. It has the potential to contribute towards transformation as it aims to instil social relationships that are based on equality and respect. It unravels the cultural assumptions that limit our capacity to celebrate diversity and also encourages us to find strategies to resist the internalisation of negative cultural messages.

This expansive view represents a shift from the traditional interest based approach to mediation that locates conflict within individuals, to a perspective that considers how the experience of conflict is influenced by relationships between individuals. A mediation practice that embraces conflict as a fluid entity, shaped by relationships within and beyond organisations and communities, can comfortably be infused with restorative justice principles. Just as transition is an ongoing process, so too is restorative justice. It is based on the notion that human beings are constructed through their relationships with others and any attempt to restore justice must therefore take this relational construct into account (Llewellyn, 2004).

The harm that results from violations of social justice is primarily felt at the level of relationships between individuals (Sampson, 1983). The concern of

justice from a restorative perspective is therefore to address this harm by restoring equality and dignity within these relationships (Llewellyn, 2004). The objective is not therefore to return relationships to the way they were prior to the conflict, but rather to restore their social equality. The constantly changing nature of relationships makes this a lengthy process which, when seen in the light of a wider attempt to restore social justice, locates it firmly within the country's overall transformation (ibid).

7. Summation

Narrative mediation relates to the broad national agenda of transformation and restorative justice in its focus on the ongoing and ever-changing nature of inter-personal relationships. Conflict is not viewed as an end in itself, but is extended beyond the specific encounter to consider implications for peoples' lives. It considers what work needs to be done after the immediate conflict has been resolved, and what mechanisms need to be set in place in anticipation of potential conflict in the future.

Personal empowerment is inherent to narrative mediation as it involves participants in joint problem-solving to create a preferred story of relationship that fits with their own values, beliefs and commitments. The mediation process raises consciousness and creates organisational and community cultures that are reflective of their conduct (Manganyi, 2004). This represents a more empowering approach to the traditional 'outsourcing' one which is premised on the belief that people are unable to sort out their problems for themselves. Dunn (2004) maintains that the ultimate objective of mediation should be to bring people closer to the possibility of sorting out problems for themselves – without the need for a third person.

Narrative mediation is informed by the poststructuralist understanding that identity is socially constructed. It uncovers how people make sense of dominant discourses and how conflict can consume relationships when these discourses are contested (ibid). Externalising conversations are used to help

disputing parties to stop identifying with the problem story and to begin to develop shared meanings, understandings and solutions.

By separating the problem from the people, and asking parties to consider the effects of the conflict, the space is opened for an understanding in which blame and shame are significantly reduced. The parties begin to co-author a story about the functions of conflict in everyone's lives and they are invited to work towards a more trusting relationship that will ultimately change the direction of the conflict (ibid). Through the deconstruction of discourses that have informed this sense of entitlement, the impact of the problem or conflict story is revealed and the preferred story begins to emerge. The success of mediation lies in the extent to which new understandings are carried into future relationships.

The value of story-telling became evident in the conflict resolution and transformation initiatives that dominated our country in the early post-liberation years. The powerful ways in which story-telling can effectively shift individuals and communities is abundantly clear. Story-telling offers a means to process painful memories and to help people to find the personal strength to confront their experiences, as well as the courage to confront each other's pain and discomfort (Abdullah, 2003).

When people share their stories, emotions are effectively channelled and trust is encouraged. It is this inter-connectedness that enables people to empathise and feel at one with their fellow humans (ibid). Story-telling also harnesses peoples' capacity for personal reflection which is integral to bringing about a new history through which to view the present, and upon which to build the future.

Given the distinct differences in South African society, as well as our unique history, it is sometimes necessary to resolve the differences within ourselves before we can resolve our conflicts with others. People frequently hold contradictory positions which have the potential for inter-personal conflict.

The process of narrative mediation, through a constant emphasis on unravelling and broadening out peoples' understandings of the conflict they are engaged in, throws up endless opportunities for the kind of reflection that will deliver this outcome.

Finally, it seems apt to consider the role of the mediator within the context of development practice. Practitioners in the field of conflict are working at the interface of a polarity between perceived right and wrong, where apparent opposites meet, and people are forced to make moral choices. Narrative mediation engages this polarity. It frees the mediator from the domain of imperatives and impartiality and encourages the raising of consciousness amongst everyone involved in the conflict, including the mediator.

It is only when we bring about interventions that are empowering, sustainable and transforming that the real contribution of development practice will be made (Soal, 2005). In addition to creating an awareness of how grand narratives shape how we view ourselves and the world around us, narrative mediation reveals the instability of dominating discourses. The discourse of the unitary, rational self as contained in Descarte's statement 'I think, therefore I am' is replaced by the belief that 'I relate, therefore I become' (Winslade and Cohen, 1995). This standpoint engages the mediator in questions relating to *whose* reason and *what* standards? This consideration of the moral and legal context of behaviour, as opposed to universal standards against which actions are judged, will hopefully pave the way for a transforming social world.

8. References

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