

EDITORIAL

Correlation of Theory and Practice in Conflict Engagement

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The separation between theory and practice in conflict engagement (CE) is in itself a *theoretical choice with practical implications*. In Western literature, there are evolving intellectual trends that would claim for the existence of only theories that stand alone as their own epistemic reality, and, on the other hand, that practices are their own stand-alone reality.

From the theoretical perspective, each phenomenon is a cultural schema, a framing in our minds, which does not exist in itself before we name and construct it. From the practice angle, life is experienced before any theoretical reflection about it, and thus actual practice prevails over conceptual schemas and challenges them constantly. Although within this debate we in academia often find ourselves along the continuum towards the theory camp, in the field of CE we know practice is just as central. Thus, we advocate praxis – or the rigorous intersection between theory-driven practice and practical theories. We undertake research and development of theories through systematic gathering of data, which we scrutinize through the systematic study of practice, and vice versa. We intervene in conflicts to gather data that can help us test and refine (or replace) our theories.

We believe that merely keeping theories on the academic shelves of our minds ensures irrelevance and defeats the calling of our field. Doing practice is for us not only mediating in the mediation center or being activists for peace. It is our day-to-day experiences as researchers, educators and citizens, practically implementing ideas of CE in daily disputes and relationships. It occurs in the way we teach and, for example, deal with power dynamics in our classroom. It is expressed in how we strive – and of course fail again and again – to implement in our lives and relationships what we expound in our theories. It is a challenge to those of us in the field to try always to say what we mean (which means first of all knowing what we mean) and do what we say. This is simultaneously a theoretical and practical challenge we sign up for when we ‘join’ this field.

As we dive into the complex and essential issue of whether and how theory and practice are interrelated, we will start with some terms and definitions.

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First, a review: As we have previously defined it, CE is “a diverse body of theoretical and applied approaches to the study of how best to understand and creatively engage conflict” (see first issue of *IJCER*, 2013/1: 5). This itself is a theoretical statement of profound practical significance. The name we call ourselves frames the attention we give to ourselves and calls upon ourselves in both theoretical and practical ways.

As a field first named ‘conflict resolution’, we have not lived up to our own standards. Our practices almost always fall short of that mark. CE, on the other hand, is a term that is both inclusive of a range of possible approaches to conflict, from settlement to management to resolution to transformation and more, and aspirational to view conflict always a potential for engagement and constructive change. It suggests, as we have described elsewhere (see introduction to volume 1, issue 1), that a major purpose of the field is to define conflict contextually and in phases (from incipient to latent to expressed) and stages of development (see from resource focused to goal-oriented to identity-driven). As a contingency approach (see introduction to volume 1, issue 2), this largely theoretical and research-driven purpose then sets the stage for applied efforts – given X conflict definition, Y intervention process, with Z goals are suggested.

Now turning to this issue, we begin with the concept of *correlation*, or the process by which two or more aspects of a phenomenon are brought into relation with one another.¹ And, of course, correlation is often reciprocal. In the case of CE, good practice is invaluable for helping refine theories, while theory can and should drive practice as a correlation. Kurt Lewin provides the ultimate justification for this correlation when he asserts that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory”.

In many ways the very complex field of CE is simply practical and systematized intuition. For example, before we react in anger to some insult, count to ten. Practically speaking, if we *all* would and could do that, the world would be a lot less violent, and conflict would be less destructive. Why we do not all do that (in fact, why so few of us do) is a theoretical question that begs for an applied direction: how might we? Moreover, who is ‘we’? And what is the difference (cultural, historical and so forth) between one *we* and another? Thus, our simple intuition starts getting quite complex.

While the field itself may indeed have its origins in systematized intuition about practical problems derived from dealing with conflict more or less creatively, its growth and development depend just as much, if not more, on rigorous theorizing about the nature of conflict itself. What is it? How does it manifest itself? What are its hidden layers? How can we distinguish between types of conflict and stages in its development? These theoretical questions have immediate and important practical implications. The anti-intellectual, and in a sense anti-theoretical, impetus that began in *Getting To Yes*, and prevails in some forms of CE practice today, may transform in favor of a genuine effort to thicken and complexify our practices in an effort to enrich and improve them. Practice cannot be

1 This introduction was inspired by a presentation on the correlation between theory and practice in the nursing profession: <www.slideshare.net/mhnsathish/theory-and-practice-correlation>.

an escape from theoretical engagement, but rather *is* a way of dealing with it. The great scientist–artist Leonardo DaVinci, who combined theoretical insight with practical effort, suggested that practitioners who lack theoretical foundations lack steering capability: “He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards a ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast.”

So it might be possible now to move from describing our field as systematized and practice-oriented intuition to theorizing about those things that make the practice of the obvious so difficult. Thus, while the basis of our field is indeed the practice of CE, this practice is filled with complexity, for example, as we have explored in the previous issue (2014, volume 2, issue 1), “what is success?” Such questions require theory to both articulate and puzzle through. In this sense, theory in our field is rooted in practice problems and questions, which are tested and developed through research and then reapplied to improving practice, and back again. In other words, the theory–practice relationship is a recursive one, hopefully in which learning and improvement occur.

Conflict theory is a lens or framework through which we can seek to understand specific conflict dynamics. Some theories are designed to be applied to addressing immediate and practical problems; other theories are more abstract and foundational to general knowledge development and testing.

In summary, it is clear to us that the field of CE is committed to a rigorous merger of theory and practice. However, since the two worlds of theory and practice operate on two sets of different, and sometimes even contending, emphases, this effort is still more aspirational than actual.

The interaction between theory and practice is essential for more effective and efficient CE. Practitioners who do not use theory (enough, or the proper one) reduce their chances of successfully engaging the conflict. On the other hand, theoreticians who are not exposed to the reality that CE practitioners experience limit their possibilities to construct successful theories.

The problem is that often this theory–practice interaction is not discussed in the literature or brought to bear in the field. A more acute problem is the different extent of voicing theory and practice: while theoreticians, usually academics, typically publish and disseminate their theories widely, the reverse is not true about the practitioners. This latter phenomenon not only limits the work of theoreticians, it also inhibits practitioners from learning about and from the experiences of their colleagues. Thus, there is a need to give voice to the practitioners, especially in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice. We hope this journal will help to address this need, *inter alia*, by encouraging practitioners to publish and conceptualize their practice in theoretical ways and by inviting theoreticians to write in ways that practitioners find useful (as in this issue).

In this framework it is important to note that the difference between theory and practice is not always the difference between theoreticians/academics and practitioners. That is, academics may practice CE and practitioners may construct valuable theories about their work. In these cases the problem is less one of action as one of systematic reflection on that action (of merging theory and practice). When teaching research methods to students in conflict resolution, we

found that combining theoretical goals with empirical and prescriptive ones often captures the unique qualitative methodology that our field often emphasizes. We also found that methods like action research and action evaluation can effectively facilitate the constant dialogue between practice as embedded theory and critical theoretical reflection. We believe that development of such methodologies is part of the growth of our field. As Einstein aptly said, "In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice, but in practice there is." We hope this issue of IJ CER will help to partially bridge the gap.

As for the three articles of this special issue, they provide voice to the peace practitioners and their work, since the first two articles were written by practitioners, and the third by a scholar (Manojlovic), but one who brings the results of interviews she conducted with peace activities. As such, this issue opens a window for scholars to learn about the reality of peace practitioners, and for practitioners to view the reality of their colleagues in other areas of conflicts. But even more than this – the two practitioners' articles (Christian and Shimoni) not only describe their own empirical practical experiences, but also go a step forward and transform their own experiences into general theoretical models. As such, these two authors bridge the gap between practice and theory and provide useful insights, not only of a theoretical kind largely for scholars, but also practical tools for practitioners in various conflicts.

As for the **types of conflicts**, the articles address mostly national/international conflicts, from many diverse conflict areas such as the Balkans, Sudan, Niger, Iraq and Colombia. An exception is Shimoni's article, which addresses interpersonal conflicts in an ethnic Bukharian community in Israel. The **cultural aspect** of CE is fairly central in this issue. Two of the articles (Christian and Shimoni) describe how Western models of mediation had to be transformed by the authors who designed new models in order to fit the non-Western characteristics of the rivals at hand. From a **bottom-up, top-down perspective**, interestingly, one of the articles (Christian's) describe top-down CE activity (of the USA administration), while the other two (Shimoni and Manojlovic) describe bottom-up activity (of interpersonal mediators and of peace activists). Let us now turn to describe the articles.

The **first article** was written by Lt Colonel Patrick Christian, who has been assigned to the US Department of Defense, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy. During the last 20 years, as a US Army Special Forces officer with the United States Special Operations Command, he has had wide experience in mediating the rivals in the violent intra-state conflicts of Sudan, Niger, Iraq and Colombia. This experience led him to the conclusion that he needs to change the narrative therapy practice of Michael White and the narrative mediation model of Winslade & Monk, which he initially used. There was a need for a model that would better fit the rural, tribal communities caught in cycles of violence. He thus describes this reformulated model and its application. In other words, Patrick the practitioner uses his mediation experience to develop a theoretical model.

The **second article** was written by David Shimoni, an Israeli mediation practitioner. He describes attempts to practise standard/Western mediation to resolve

interpersonal conflicts in the traditional ethnic community of the Israeli-Jewish Bukharians. These attempts failed owing to the incompatibility of this mediation model with the community's customs. After providing a thorough review of mediation models, he describes his own research (questionnaires, focus group and interviews) that examined the characteristics of the Jewish Bukharians. On the basis of the findings of his research he constructed a hybrid model that is composed of Western mediation principles and components that were adapted to the Jewish Bukharians. The hybrid model was tested by David in a few interpersonal conflicts and found successful.

The **third article** was written by Borislava Manojlovic, from Seton Hall University, USA. She conducted interviews with seven activists who participated in various peace activities with regard to the 1990s conflicts in the Balkans. Using Dynamical Systems Theory and Levinas' concept of responsibility, she aimed to find out what motivated these activists to promote peace although they lived in a very violent environment. She also explored what the activists view as effective methods in promoting peace.

We hope that you find this issue useful, that it helps to partially bridge the gap between theory and practice and that it will promote more initiatives in this bridging direction. To this end, the Conflict Management, Resolution and Negotiation Program at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, that publishes this journal, also conducts in January 12-14, 2015, the international conference on 'Bridging Theory and Practice of Creative Conflict Engagement' (see conference program at the end of this issue).