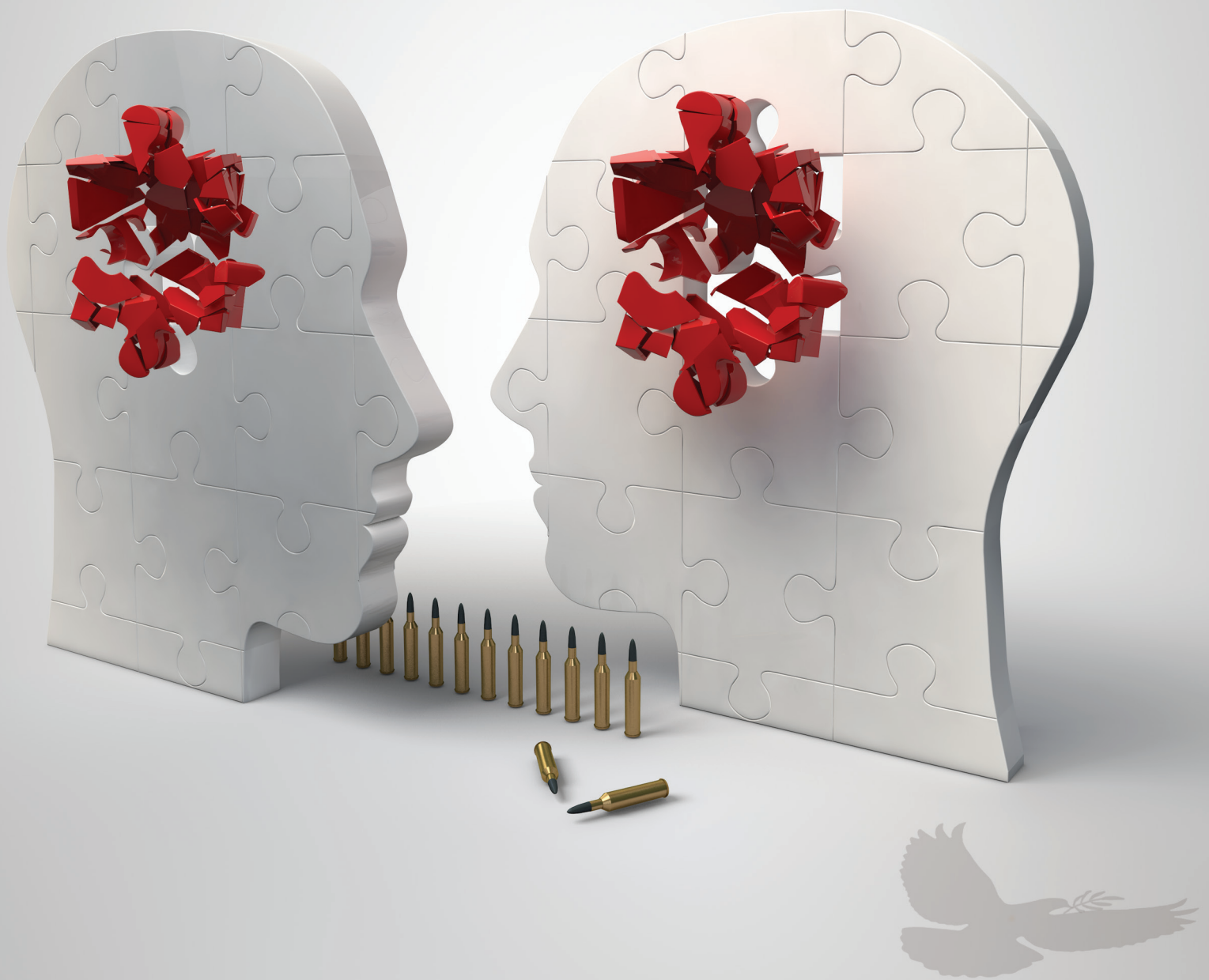


States of Mind in Conflict

Enhancing a psychological understanding of peace mediation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The 'States of Mind in Conflict' (SOMIC) project launched in August 2020, based in the Centre for Researching & Embedding Human Rights (CREHR) at Birkbeck, University of London. The project was kindly funded by the Swiss Federal government research programme, with subject matter expertise provided by the Human Security Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

SOMIC is a pilot study seeking to identify how a psychological perspective might enhance the practice of peace mediation. The overall aim is to assist mediators to cultivate an enhanced sensitivity to the psychological register of the peace mediation experience and to facilitate a particular type of encounter between parties to mediation that results in the creation of a 'safe space' – one where emotions and states of mind can be acknowledged and digested.

The team of psychologists based at CREHR adopted an iterative methodology which started from exploratory talks and two focus groups with experienced mediators. The talks fed into the design of the semi-structured research protocol subsequently used for 1:1 interviews. In total 53 practitioners were interviewed across the 3 phases, and the data were thematically analysed. Further details on the participants, methodology, data analysis and findings can be found in the Final Report <https://crehr.bbk.ac.uk/SOMIC-final-report>

The question we started from was: In your experience, how can psychology enhance peace mediation practice?

The analysis and findings are grounded in what participants said, rather than being guided by a pre-determined intellectual agenda. As project lead, my position throughout the project has been one of an outsider to peace mediation, keen to find out how practitioners understand psychology and its uses in peace mediation through listening as a psychologist and a clinician to their accounts and experiences. Participating mediation practitioners shared with great generosity, passion for their mission, and concern for what they perceive is problematic in the field of peace mediation, and the observations, findings and recommendations reported here reflect a commitment to reporting these as faithfully as possible.

The report on *States Of Mind In Conflict* is long overdue, necessary, and timely. Today ideology is no longer the key word in geopolitics; what we need to be improving is the *geopsychology*.

We need someone who can help us to analyse psychologically the counterparts' and our own position. If we don't put ourselves in the counterpart's shoes, we will not know how to understand their position and grievances, and establish trust, which is one of the crucial points of a mediation. We need a psychologist to do this. We also need a psychologist to support us because mediators are terribly lonely and the pressures on mediators are enormous because the war is going on, people are dying, and you need to deliver. There is also the danger of creeping post-traumatic stress, which affects the team, yourself and perhaps even your counterparts. You need to have someone to help you to identify that.

For all these reasons, it is important that the recommendations that Professor Bruna Seu is making in this report are implemented.

Staffan de Mistura, Undersecretary-General, Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Western Sahara.

** the full text of this shortened forward can be found in the final report*

OVERARCHING OBSERVATIONS

The key recommendation is to use the findings of this research to grow and enhance peace mediation practice, by turning the identified gaps, tensions, and neglected aspects into a new paradigm where mediators are better equipped with psychosocial tools, strategies, and understandings.

As an overarching frame and reflecting participants' comments, there is a need to pay much more attention to and to shift the dial toward the psychological and, in particular, a psychosocial¹ perspective. Currently, the technical, power-brokering aspects of mediation, which apply psychology instrumentally, appear to dominate practices in Track 1² while the relational applications of psychology tend to characterise transformative practices in Track 2 and Track 3. Because the human aspect of mediation is inextricably bound with emotions, the report recommends a fundamental change in the way emotions are understood and dealt with in peace mediation, bringing 'the human'³ into dialogue with the technical, power brokering aspects of mediation.

For a real shift to happen, the 4 STIR recommendations – Systemic shifts to integrate the psychosocial, Training enhancement, Increased psychological support, and Research for expertise/development – should be activated simultaneously and in collaboration with each other.

¹ A psychosocial perspective is interested in the crisscrossing of internal (biographical, emotional, and unconscious) with external (cultural, social and political) aspects and dynamics within and between individuals.

² Tracks 1, 2, 3 refer to: Track 1: negotiations between elite/top-level leadership; Track 2 negotiations between 'non-state actors', often involving civil society; Track 3 is often referred to as 'people to people' diplomacy and operates at grassroots level.

³ The shorthand term 'human' used in this report refers to any personal, emotional, interpersonal elements of both conflict parties and mediation practitioners which are touched on during peace mediation. I differentiate these 'human' aspects from the 'technical' aspects which are about strategies, power-brokering, agreements etc.

Overall Recommendations (STIR)

1. A **systemic paradigm shift** is needed in mediation practices that incorporates a different and more psychosocially-informed engagement with emotions and expands understanding of what peace mediation consists of, and more consciously and actively integrates the 'relationship-building' aspects with the technical, power-brokering in mediation. This would also facilitate a better integration of and cross-fertilisation between 'elite mediation' and 'transformative' practices. This paradigm shift should include a cultural change in the field of peace mediation (in particular in Track 1) to enhance practitioners' psychological agility⁴; and to enable the embeddedness and consequent normalisation of psychologically-informed practices, including supervision and psychological support for mediators, to avoid stigma and attend to the needs of all mediation actors.

The systemic shift is necessary but not sufficient to guarantee the embeddedness of the recommended changes. Their lasting and sustainable embeddedness requires the systemic shift to happen together with and be integrated with, the other 3 STIR recommendations.

2. Expanded incorporation of the psychological angle into mediation **training**, to humanise mediation processes, equip practitioners with psychological tools and techniques, and increase practitioner reflexivity.

3. **Increased support for mediators** that will include individual and team psychological support and psychologically informed supervision. The support needs to be embedded and institutionalised to avoid practitioners' stigmatisation by employers and colleagues.

4. **Research** to grow practitioners' psychosocial **expertise**. Further research is needed to explore in detail and map out existing uses of psychological insights, techniques, and breakthroughs in peace mediation, through interviews, focus groups, and real-life case studies, to build flexible, self-reflective and contextual psychosocial mediation expertise that brings together theory, practice and self-reflection.

In the next pages, these recommendations are discussed individually, together with related findings and illustrative quotes.

⁴ Psychological agility refers to practitioners' ability to apply psychology both instrumentally and relationally, depending on the context and nature of the conflict, and to switch between the two when the context requires, at all levels of mediation.

RECOMMENDATIONS IN DETAIL

Systemic shifts

Trainning

Increased
psychological
support

Research

(STIR)

SYSTEMIC SHIFTS

ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES⁵

Negotiating after for example the Rwanda genocide, or ... imagine that Palestinians and the Israelis eventually getting to the table, and you tell me there's no trauma there or there are no emotions... how do you expect people at whatever level to sit there in a completely emotionless state and just purely intellectually deal with the issues? it's just not possible.

All the attention and the cameras are on the UN Envoy and in my work with UN people when we asked them about what they would like to know about mediation, they would say "we want to have interviews with the UN Envoys" and there was no recognition of the fact that mediation without the active involvement of the people whose peace is being built is an anomaly.

FINDINGS

1. The sector suffers from a problematic culture of denial of emotions, both in terms of validating their importance and role in peace mediation, and in recognising the toxicity of the environment for practitioners.
2. There is disparity between mediation tracks in terms of a) hierarchy, power and status of practitioners, b) hierarchy, power and status of counterparts and interlocutors, c) beliefs, ideology and theories of change underpinning the work being done, d) different priorities in regard to power brokering or relationship building. These disparities across tracks generate discontent between practitioners and interfere with more joined-up thinking.
3. Practitioners perceive an incommensurability between elite mediation and transformative practices, and how each uses psychology. Broadly speaking, a power-based approach with an instrumental use of psychology is seen as being predominant in track 1 mediation, and a relationship-building approach with a relational use of psychology principally being used in track 2 and 3.
4. Psychological agility is needed at all levels and tracks of peace mediation practice because: a) it enables practitioner to switch between instrumental and relational modes and uses of psychology as the context requires; b) it increases practitioners' self-reflexive awareness of what in the process touches them personally, and to attend to their emotional responses so that it doesn't interfere with their professional roles and actions; c) it supports practitioners ability to relate to both the role played by themselves and the actors and the complex human beings behind the roles.
5. Gendered dynamics permeate the field, revealed through an almost exclusively male presence in track 1 mediation. The circulating norms of archaic masculinity and macho bravado militate against the recognition and the addressing of practitioners' emotional distress. The sector's gender imbalance in terms of representativeness in different tracks, and their relative power and status, can sometimes replicate similar disparities in the conflicts and how they are approached.

⁵ For the sake of succinctness, quotes have been shortened while preserving their key message. The full, unedited quotes can be found in the Final Report. With a few exceptions where parts of the same quote have been used to illustrate different points, each quote comes from a different interviewee.

These are NGO, INGO, UN personnel. And there's a kind of boy zone bravado about this, which is about the refusal to recognise the impact. In general, you're being a wuss if you admit that you're under pressure and going crazy. It's something that the UN and other multilateral agencies have been very slow to recognise and the responsibility they have towards their employees. I would start just by saying there's a problem here. There's no counselling available or support. And if you complain, you'll be told you're not capable of doing the job.

If we don't include the persons that suffer most, your chances of having a sustainable agreement is very much linked. I have always said, "Give me the demographics of this country. What's the representative of women?" Fifty-two percent. "How many on this?" Twenty percent. Do you think we can do something reasonable by excluding the large population that we know suffers the most, that we know cares after the dying and death?"

There's this sort of idea that one is kind of 'the realist camp, the lone mediator, big power camp', and the other is 'the hippie-dippy Birkenstock-wearing tree-hugger camp'. This is how I feel the camp one sees camp two, and camp two sounds like "those evil men who don't think about any of these things", but they do think about this stuff, but they don't think of it in the same way, and so there needs (to be) a dialogue between these two different sides, in a different way to figure out how to do it all differently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A paradigm shift that incorporates a different and more psychosocially-informed **engagement with emotions** is needed to: develop greater psychological agility for all mediators; discourage the sanitisation of emotions in mediation processes; combat denial of emotions; critique and avoid dominance of a Western rationalistic framework. Such a paradigm shift could make a vital impact on all mediation actors and foster a deeper understanding of conflict parties, mediators' wellbeing, and intersubjective aspects of mediation processes.
2. Within tracks: **Integration** of power-based/instrumental and transformative/relational approaches and applications of psychology to foster practitioners' psychological agility.
3. Across tracks: Reflexive dialogues and exchanges to foster **joined up thinking and cross-fertilisation** through a systematic identification of the psychologies and theories of change underpinning practices, connectivities and disconnections between Tracks, and the uncoupling of skills and practices from Tracks.
4. Increased **institutional reflexivity** to consider the role of gendered dynamics and assumptions towards mediators' emotional wellbeing to combat denial, self-silencing, and to actively validate and promote psychological sensitivity as an essential tool in mediation.
5. **Structural embedding and normalisation** of psychological aspects of mediation through institutional changes to recognise the emotional impact of mediation processes on practitioners and legitimise and respond to mediation practitioners' psychological distress through institutions' duty of care. This will benefit both practitioners' wellbeing and mediation processes.

TRAINING

to increase incorporation of the psychological angle into mediation training, including psychological tools and techniques.

ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES

Conflict has always huge consequences on each of the persons involved, also those sitting at the table, and they all have personal stories to tell. They have been participating themselves in the war, they have their brothers and sisters that have been killed, they have their mother that has been raped, they have an uncle that has been kidnapped, everyone is touched one way or the other. So, you need to psychologically get through that. If you just bring parties together and just jump through what the solution there (is), it's never going to work.

People under stress think with their heart and feel with their mind so you need to know what is motivating the action, (the) psychological aspect.

[We need] the wisdom to say "they're angry, we let them vent their anger". And so [we need to know about] the psychology of our group going through the kind of historical, you know, that kind of history and, of course, the psychology of the individuals.

FINDINGS

1. Practitioners believe that relationship building is a prerequisite to peace mediation work at all levels and that breakthroughs happen when peace mediators manage to relate to parties at a more personal level, allow emotions to be expressed, and engage with what lies behind the parties' manifest behaviour. Storytelling plays a key role in engaging with the personal. However, particularly for Track 1 mediators, an engagement with the personal is in tension with needing to remain neutral and objective. Practitioners feel insufficiently trained psychologically for handling these tensions and to manage personal contents, emotional registers, and the psychological effects of trauma, all of which are needed to better humanise mediation practices and engage more meaningfully with the conflict parties.
2. Mediation practitioners are aware that trauma plays a large part in conflict situations, particularly when trauma has been repeated and intergenerational but feel they lack specialist knowledge to understand the psychological interrelation between parties' history and their present mindset, the psychological skills to shift the mindset, and to enable them to recognise and handle the emotions and manifestations of trauma in the mediation process.
3. Preliminary psychological work needs to take place to enhance the likelihood of success of the mediation process. Among others, practitioners stressed the need for mediators to psychologically enable consenting parties to make better use of processes that are potentially foreign to them culturally and emotionally.
4. Mediation practitioners feel they lack key psychological skills to emotionally withstand and manage the highly distressing personal aspects that conflict parties bring to the mediation process. They need expert input to support their resilience.

It isn't the psychological state of the person standing before you right this minute, that is one drop in a very long line of why they think the way they do and what has built their psychological worldview leading them to sitting in front of you right there, so as mediators, you have to really understand what it feels like to be inside the conflict, and feeling the sort of the walls closing in, and the weight of history, and the weight of your community on you.

When you've been fighting all your life, the idea of not (fighting) is actually scarier than the persistent fight.

This goes deep under my skin. My whole resilience barrier is probably going to collapse, it touches you. If (he) tells you how his parents were shot and his mother was raped in front of his eyes and then shot and then they have taken him for military training, resilience collapses relatively quickly. What's the advice of an expert? What should you do in the situation?

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Expansion of mediation training dealing with the **psychological aspects of mediation** to achieve a more layered understanding of parties in conflict and humanisation of the process and build on what is already happening, that is, practitioners' existing intuitive application of psychology, through the addition of a new, theoretically-based, vocabulary. This should include, inter alia, the psychology of attachment and historicised identity to gain a different understanding of parties' resistance to mediation; the psychology of storytelling and narrative; the psychology of trauma; individual and group identity; the psychology of parties' mindset and positioning; preliminary psychological work to facilitate mediation; a reframing of the psychology of emotions (see also recommendation S1)
2. **Reflexivity training for mediators** at different levels of seniority and ad-hoc training for experienced mediators to enhance their resilience. Enhancing mediators' reflexivity would contribute both to mediators' relationship-building with conflict parties, and to the monitoring of their own resilience levels.
3. Introducing **psychological descriptors** from relevant psychological theory to give practitioners a vocabulary to recognise, name and work with the psychological components of peace mediation and explain parties' and mediation practitioners' behaviour in psychological terms. Additionally, the process of labelling and describing would aim to develop practitioners' psychological sensitivity towards the human aspects of the mediation and integrate these into the technical power brokering.
4. Introduction of **psychological skills and techniques**, particularly from clinical applications of psychology – e.g., containment and emotional regulation, deep listening and paraphrasing, the use of mediators' psychological sensitivity and self-reflexivity as tools to gain a deeper understanding of the mediation encounter.
5. Develop or **enhance group reflexivity** to identify splits and re-enactments from the conflict.

INCREASED PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR PRACTITIONERS

ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES

Those processes change your life, really go into your soul, your brain, your body, you'll have the kind of the scars of the negotiation all over you. It's something that really gets into you in a way that is difficult (to describe)

Between their conscience, their feelings, their emotions, their outrage, their ambitions to succeed, the pressure... they (mediators) are alone. They can hardly talk to anyone about it. Neither to their bosses because that makes the bosses then start wondering whether you can handle it. Neither to the people around you, your family. Neither to your team because they need to look up to you as the leader. And you can't, obviously, hint anything of that to your counterparts because then they would know how they can have an entry point in you. So, the word is "alone", unless you start talking to a psychologist. But the moment it's known and then the rumour goes around, that weakens you. So, you don't do it.

FINDINGS

1. The telling of their lived experience as peace mediation practitioners emphasised the vulnerability of mediators, the enormous pressure bearing down on them and the violence intrinsic to the process. Practitioners feel "courageously afraid" and experience multi-layered aloneness.
2. Mediators act as emotional sponges, absorbing into themselves the distress and toxicity of the process. Practitioners apply strict self-censorship and self-control and, above all, self-repression of the shock, upset, anger and outrage they feel, particularly track 1 mediators who frequently must behave in a friendly manner with brutal oppressors.
3. The sector suffers from a problematic culture of denial of emotions, both in terms of validating their importance and role in peace mediation, and in recognising the toxicity of the environment for practitioners. Mediators consider the internalisation of this culture of denial and its systemic silencing and normalisation to be damaging to their wellbeing, and also detrimental to the process
4. Practitioners reported the severe physical, mental, psychological and relational impact of the process on their wellbeing, which results in chronic stress, vicarious or secondary trauma, and an overload on their resilience, which they manage through a combination of functional and dysfunctional strategies.
5. The sector, and track 1 mediation in particular, seems to be dominated by a macho bravado culture, which equates needing support with weakness. Practitioners unequivocally regretted the fact that their emotional needs are unrecognised and requested that psychological support is offered to both individual mediators and their support teams.

The burden of mediators in this area is serious. You feel like you're holding back walls of water on either side and you're trying to keep them from crashing in and drowning everyone, I think that's really hard.

The other aspect which has been very difficult to manage is controlling your outrage because you didn't join the UN because you want to sell cars or Coca-Cola. You joined because you look at it as a mission to save people, or to make a difference for people if you can. And that is confronted by you having to deal with people who are bombing those people, and you are supposed to meet him, shake hands, smile and listen, and not be outraged to the point of saying, "You know what..." And that element has a price. You need a psychologist.

Profiling of the mediator is much more important than the profiling of the parties, and then actually assessing them for burnouts nonstop, there has to be a process that comes in, and it comes in with practical help in place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Systemic recognition of the emotional impact** of mediation processes on practitioners. As per recommendation S5, this needs to be institutionally embedded to avoid stigma and to break through systemic denial. This also involves a paradigm shift in the way the emotions of mediators are understood and treated, particularly in track 1 mediation.
2. **Psychological support for mediators** to combat their isolation and aloneness, to support self-reflexivity in order to recognise and manage personal resonances in what emerges in mediation processes, to increase their self-awareness around their resilience thresholds, to assess and monitor their psychological suitability and wellbeing and increase their resilience.
3. **Psychological support for mediation teams** to support the team's resilience and reflexivity, and to identify and deal with enactment of conflict dynamics within the team. This is the applied and contextual aspect of recommendation T4.
4. **Psychological supervision for mediators** both at strategically important point of the process⁶ and on-call if/when needed.

⁶ For example at moments of impasse and/or once the mediator has an overview of the dynamics at play in the mediation, e.g. 4/6 week after the mediation process starts).

RESEARCH – TOOLKITS – EXPERTISE

ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES

And then there's another issue, the people who debrief us are our elderly mediators who have retired. So, their end is bad as mental state as you are, if you're in a bad mental state. And to a certain extent completely conditioned or should I say defending the kind of life they used to lead in the past. It's not the kind of people we should be talking to. They're as bonkers as I am!

People follow this kind of template-driven formula approach and are not sufficiently confident or able to dig deeper. And they can't dig deeper because that deeper is frightening. It's nasty down there.

Having that sense like a leader who was holding the space together, he was holding that room and he was watching the dynamics. He was aware of everything that was happening, he knew when so and so shuts that book, it means this. The sense that we had somebody holding it all together (made it) a really safe space and so it's okay to be in this space. And a safe space doesn't mean the two parties trust each other. It means we're all going to get through this somehow, and somebody's in charge of this, holding this process together.

FINDINGS

1. As well as power negotiations, mediation exchanges are also relational interpersonal encounters, in which emotions play a fundamental role. Mediation encounters are most effective when emotions can be managed and contained, and the people involved feel safe and treated with respect and care. It is critical that mediators develop a psychological sensitivity to the emotional currents as a key dynamic in peace mediation, and attend to, understand, and manage the emotional register and currents pulsing through the encounters.
2. Peace mediation practitioners recognise and agree on the qualities required to be an effective mediator, which are deeply psychological. Increasing practitioners' theoretical psychological knowledge would deepen their understanding of why these qualities are important, how they operate psychologically, and how they can be learnt and developed.
3. What erupts in mediation encounters might not be simply interpersonal or personal to the individuals involved but could also involve unconscious communication or repetition of unrecognised aspects of the conflict.
4. Practitioners' real-life vignettes illustrated how interpersonal interactions between practitioners in mediation situations can model the psychology of conflict and reconciliation. Becoming aware of these unconscious re-enactments and being able to manage the psychology of those key moments could prevent a breakdown and contribute to a breakthrough in the process.
5. There appears to be a closed-system and insular quality to the way knowledge is transmitted in the peace mediation field, coupled with an overreliance on in-house institutional training and debriefing, and on classical texts, which many experience as formulaic and problematic.

⁷ One of opposition group negotiators, who was an ex-general in the army, said "We've just received report that tonight we will be arrested." To which the chief negotiator on the ruling party's side said, "We will go with you, and we will make sure that nothing happens to you." I saw that as one of those moments that you're looking for in a mediation where the attention shifts from negotiating about topics to reaching out to the others as human beings, and I thought that was a brilliant moment. So, I said, "This is very encouraging that we can at this point in time where we begin to understand that our future lies in the hands of all of us. So, if we can begin to protect the dignity and safety of one another, I think it's a step forward." The UN mediator chastised me, and he said, "It's not a time for preaching," and I shouldn't do that. So, and lo and behold, that night, the opposition negotiators went into hiding and that was the end of the mediation. Gone. Boom. I tried to acknowledge the psychological shifts that were happening because, here, former enemies who couldn't stand one another, reached out and said, "I will go with you, and I will protect you." Yeah, so, eventually the whole thing fell apart.

⁸ And then he apologized at the end of the day and he didn't care that everybody knew it[...] but if you understand human beings and the level of stress etc, and the fact that he owned it unlocked a whole new day where everybody was in a great mood the next day because we got through something weird and difficult, and that's really, really powerful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Creation of an **archive of/for practice**. Further research is needed to map out and study examples of psychological agility and breakthroughs, investigate psychological dimensions of mediation through case studies, interviews with practitioners in all tracks of mediation, interviews with conflict parties, and workshops between mediation practitioners and psychologists, to identify and record examples of successful integration of instrumental and relational uses of psychology in practices across mediation tracks.
2. Build a dynamic **psychological toolkit** to support psychologically-agile mediation practices and training.
3. Support the establishment of mediation training and **expertise** that transcends the insularity of existing debriefing by institutional mediators and is based on the dynamic accumulation and circulation of situated examples of psychologically informed practices. It is essential that this psychological training loop is integrated into existing mediation training loops to better equip practitioners for the increasing complexity of the challenges facing peace mediation practice.

⁷ The mediation context of this quote: an opposition leader was challenging the President and violence had erupted

⁸ The quote describes an event in which the lead mediator shouted at a member of his team

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The **Final Report** and more information on the project can be found on the project website: <https://crehr.bbk.ac.uk/SOMIC-final-report>

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Swiss FDFA.

The author's views are based on the expressions of the opinions and observations communicated by participants during preliminary interviews, focus groups and individual interviews, which have been reported as accurately as possible.

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