
Communication and culture: Implications for conflict resolution practitioners

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Stereotypical beliefs, prejudices, and ethnocentrism make cross-cultural communication difficult and ineffective. The conflict resolution practitioner must be aware of issues which may impact upon cross-cultural communication, as well as his or her personal beliefs and attitudes which may negatively impact on communication. This article examines issues that impede cross-cultural communication and suggests ways in which it could become positive and thus more effective.

INTRODUCTION

Linguistics has been identified as one of the most important components of culture.¹ As Sapir argued, to understand culture, it is essential to understand the mode of communication of a group. An analysis of the manner in which culture impacts on communication and, thus, in which communication impacts on conflict is extremely important in conflict resolution.

Methods of communication that are approved by those who share the same cultural identity promote shared understanding within the group. Culture is learnt through a communication process which begins from childhood.²

As communication embodies cultural identity, it is central to conflict intervention. Conflict is often defined as a breakdown in communication, or as an inevitable by-product. Thus, developing effective communication skills is important in both conflict prevention and resolution. Conflict intervention can only be really effective if the conflict resolution practitioner is familiar with the methods of communication within a group. Intervention by conflict resolution practitioners may also assist parties in conflict to develop effective communication skills.

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Communication involves the sending and receiving of messages between two or more persons and the “generation of meaning”³ associated with the message. The sender sends a message with an intended meaning and expects the receiver to perceive the meaning intended from the message. However, the meaning perceived by the receiver may be different from that intended by the sender, and that may result in conflict.

Messages are sent through symbols, which include verbal and non-verbal communication, and, as Hofstede et al have pointed out, “even ordinary symbols can have a powerful influence on relationships and the ultimate success or failure of an encounter”.⁴ Symbols used to send and receive messages may be misinterpreted, leading to confusion and/or an escalation of conflict. The interpretation of cultural symbols is particularly problematic across different cultures because of each culture’s standards, norms and practices

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¹ Darnell R and Irvine JT (eds), *The Collected Works of Edward Sapir* (Mouton de Gruyter, 1999).

² Jandt FE, *Intercultural Communication: An Introduction* (Sage Publications, 1995) pp 89-90.

³ Hall BJ, *Among Cultures: The Challenge of Communication* (Wadsworth/Thomson, 2002) p 16.

⁴ Hofstede GJ, Pedersen PB and Hofstede G, *Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories and Synthetic Cultures* (Intercultural Press, 2002) p 62.

Parties in communication need to be aware of the interdependent nature of communication in order to accept joint responsibility for ineffective communication. This can then promote a willingness on the part of the parties to engage in collaborative processes in dealing with related conflicts.⁵

A conceptualisation of communication as interaction requires an understanding of “interaction”. Interaction occurs through various activities engaged in by humans. Information relating to these activities is processed through what Hall identified as “primary message systems”. According to Hall, there are 10 primary message systems of communication within groups and between persons: interaction, association, subsistence, sexuality, territoriality, temporality, learning, play, defence and exploitation.⁶ All these require methods of communication acceptable within a particular culture. For example, rules of association within some cultures may revolve around caste systems; rules relating to interaction may be linked with age; and specific rules may guide land ownership. Effective and positive communication, therefore, requires an understanding and mindfulness of cultural patterns.⁷ According to Jandt, “the extent to which the source and the receiver have similar understandings of the culture in which the communication takes place is critical to the success of the communication”.⁸

Some factors which are relevant to and which may impact upon cross-cultural communication include: context; face-saving; the use of verbal and non-verbal communication; language differences and interpretation; and rules about eye-contact, silence, space and time. Context refers to the classification of a culture as high- or low-context. People in high context cultures tend to engage in more indirect communication, while those in low-context cultures generally engage in more direct communication. The concept of saving face relates to shaming behaviour in conflict and conflict resolution. All these factors are culturally determined and may impact on relationships negatively if the rules of one culture are unknown to, or not respected by, a person from another culture.

In addition to the factors identified above, cross-cultural interaction becomes more problematic where parties proceed on the basis of generalised assumptions, stereotypes, prejudices and ethnocentrism. These factors create the real problems in cross-cultural communication.

ISSUES IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Stereotypes

The desire of humans to understand and make sense of the world leads to categorisation and eventually stereotypes. Categorisation, as Hall defines it, means “putting things together that are perceived to match in some way and simultaneously separating those things from other concepts or objects in the world”.⁹ Stereotyping is ascribing “certain characteristics to an entire group of people”.¹⁰ Gudykunst identifies three steps of stereotyping:

- (a) we categorize others based on easily identifiable characteristics;
- (b) we assume that certain attributes apply to most or all of the people in the category, and that people in the category are different than people in other categories with respect to these attributes; and
- (c) we assume that individual members of the category have the attributes associated with their groups.¹¹

⁵ Hall, n 3, p 18.

⁶ Hall ET, *The Silent Language* (Anchor Books Doubleday, 1990) pp 38-59. See also Poyatos F, *Nonverbal Communication Across Disciplines: Volume 1 – Culture, Sensory Interaction, Speech, Conversation* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 2002) p 3. Poyatos suggests that culture is a communication continuum – levels of interaction, containing different activities which eventually become culture. Culture is therefore formed through a continuous process of interaction and activities “modified across time and space” (p 5).

⁷ Gudykunst WB, *Bridging Differences: Effective Intergroup Communication* (Sage Publications, 1994) p 39.

⁸ Jandt, n 2, p 26.

⁹ Hall, n 3, p 198.

¹⁰ Hall, n 3, p 198.

¹¹ Gudykunst, n 7, p 89.

Once stereotypes are established, the relationship between groups is likely to be guided by them.¹² Such stereotypes generally pass from one generation to another (learnt subconsciously from childhood)¹³, without being tested, and leaving little room for change of perception. The supposed basis of stereotypical assumptions made about a group might be non-existent and unfounded, but if stereotypes imprison the views that others have of that group, changes in perception may be impossible. They mostly “reflect social norms – the generally acceptable ways of thinking, feeling and behaving that people in a group agree on and endorse as right and proper”.¹⁴

Making generalised assumptions about a group prevents recognition of individual differences within that group.¹⁵ In this sense, stereotypes influence information processing. Although stereotypes may be negative (assigning unfriendly, unattractive, or ridiculing attributes) or positive, groups normally produce negative stereotypes¹⁶ about out-groups and will, when processing information, tend to use stored negative stereotypes, resulting in their confirmation. According to Gudykunst, we “unconsciously try to confirm our expectations when we communicate with members of other groups”.¹⁷ Negative stereotyping is likely to lead to communication breakdown, being an “inaccurate predictor of others’ behaviour”.¹⁸ Stereotypes are not in themselves the same as prejudices, as Hall points out, but they can, and often do, lead to prejudices against particular groups.¹⁹ A first meeting with a person from a particular culture may be clouded by stored myths and stereotypes about that culture.

Perception of conflict may also be based on stereotypical beliefs and assumptions rather than on existing facts. An action might be construed as a conflict because of certain preconceptions a person might have about a particular culture.

Parties’ accounts of conflict may be constructed on the basis of unrealistic myths and stereotypes. The basis of a cultural myth which forms the grounds for a conflict may in fact be non-existent. If A believes that B comes from a particular cultural background stereotyped as aggressive, A is likely to approach B with that mindset, and to adopt styles that will counter the expected aggression, perhaps by an aggressive style.²⁰

Prejudice

Prejudice, as it is used here, is defined as a “rigid attitude that is (1) based on group membership, and (2) predisposes an individual to feel, think, or act in a negative way toward another person or group of persons”.²¹ Unlike stereotypes, prejudices are essentially negative, and can be felt towards one’s own group or an out-group. In this sense, prejudices are different from ethnocentrism. The effect of prejudices on cross-cultural relations is normally negative, because in most situations “[p]rejudice is based on categorization and the desire to control others in ways that demean them directly or indirectly”.²² Prejudices can be directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously held.²³

¹² Stangor C and Schaller M, “Stereotypes as Individual and Collective Representations” in Macrae CN, Stangor C, Hewstone M (eds), *Stereotypes and Stereotyping* (The Guilford Press, 1996) p 13.

¹³ Maass A and Arcuri L, “Language and Stereotyping” in Macrae et al, n 12, p 194.

¹⁴ Mackie DM, Hamilton DL, Susskind J and Rosselli F, “Social Psychological Foundations of Stereotype Formation” in Macrae et al, n 12, p 60.

¹⁵ Hall, n 3, p 198.

¹⁶ Jandt, n 2, p 54. See also Hall, n 3, p 204 on the prevalence of negative stereotypes.

¹⁷ Gudykunst, n 7, p 92-93.

¹⁸ Gudykunst, n 7, p 93.

¹⁹ Hall believes that linking stereotypes and prejudices blurs the distinction between them and leads to confusion. However, he agrees that the destructive use of stereotypes leads to prejudices and ethnocentrism. See Hall, n 3, pp 198, 204.

²⁰ Gunning IR, “Diversity Issues in Mediation: Controlling Negative Cultural Myths” (1995) 1 *Journal of Dispute Resolution* 55 at 80.

²¹ Hall, n 3, pp 208-209.

²² Hall, n 3, pp 208-209.

Communication and prejudice are related in the same way as communication and stereotypes are related. Prejudices spread through communication. Hall identifies five forms of negative prejudice: it can be blatant, that is, an “active denigration of members of an outgroup ... based on the belief that the outgroup is in some way inferior to the ingroup and, therefore not worthy of decent treatment”.²⁴ This type of prejudice can be expressed violently, or can operate insidiously, and may lead to discrimination in workplaces and general social discrimination.

Another form of negative prejudice is “conceit” prejudice, ie a belief that the other group is inferior to one’s own group, leading to trivialisation of the achievements and successes of that group, or individuals from that group, projecting the group as incompetent, and successful only because of special treatment. “This sort of prejudice creates and reinforces expectations that members of the other group are lacking in terms of professional or social abilities.”²⁵

“Symbolic” prejudice involves a:

show of antagonism towards an outgroup’s actions in society ... a concern for the status quo of existing power relationships and the fear that this other group is going to disturb it ... Thus only those who are in a position of power can engage in symbolic prejudice. This form of prejudice is also found in institutional practices that perpetuate certain advantages for the dominant group in a larger community.²⁶

Hall claims that those who engage in this type of prejudice deny their prejudice.²⁷

Other forms of negative prejudice are described as “tokenism” and “arm’s length prejudice”. Tokenism involves known prejudices harboured against an out-group, but which may not be admitted by persons who hold them. Those persons might give token acceptance, but may refuse to give substantial and other important assistance to the other group.²⁸ Arm’s length prejudice is when people engage in “positive or friendly behaviors with members of the out-group in one setting, but not in others”.²⁹ This prejudice occurs in the relational setting and may be difficult to detect. The more subtle forms of prejudice may in fact be more damaging and have a more profound effect than the more overt forms.³⁰

The effects of prejudices on cross-cultural conflict and resolution must be addressed in conflict resolution. Even when issues relating to negative prejudice are not explicitly mentioned in conflict, stereotypes and prejudices may be used to explain cultural differences and to interpret behaviour. Prejudices may result in discrimination, abuse of rights and violence, which makes conflicts intractable. Justifying the actions of in-group members and demonising out-group members is very common in conflict.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is the belief that “one’s own group [forms] the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it”.³¹ Ethnocentrism is a feeling of superiority which tends to make people blame out-group members for in-group problems and also to maintain a substantial level of relational distance from members of the out-group. An example of ethnocentrism is viewing those who do not speak the dominant language fluently as unintelligent.³²

²³ Hall, n 3, p 209.

²⁴ Hall, n 3, p 210.

²⁵ Hall, n 3, p 211.

²⁶ Hall, n 3, p 211.

²⁷ Hall, n 3, p 211.

²⁸ Hall, n 3, p 211.

²⁹ Hall, n 3, p 212.

³⁰ Hall, n 3, p 212.

³¹ Gudykunst, n 7, p 77; see also Hall, n 3, p 204.

³² Hall, n 3, pp 204-205.

Although ethnocentrism may have positive outcomes in terms of creating a strong social identity and self esteem, its negative effect will be felt more in a multicultural society because it:

can prevent groups from learning new and productive knowledge that could be gained from other groups. In addition, feelings and expressions of ethnocentrism that protect a position of superiority breed increased competition, fear, anger, and hate, all of which can lead to different types of damaging conflicts.³³

Ethnocentrism may also lead to a lack of willingness to engage in co-operative conflict resolution processes.

COMMUNICATION AND CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICTS

Communication involves the generation of meaning, and meaning-making is determined by our perception, selection of stimuli, organisation of stimuli into categories and the interpretation and evaluation of what has been selected. Therefore, the effect of stereotypes, prejudices and ethnocentrism should not be underestimated (even though it may be difficult to measure) in cross-cultural conflicts and resolution.

It has been established that cultural differences can produce stereotypes and assumptions. According to Pedersen, “[t]he more cultural differences there are between people in conflict, the more difficulty they will have communicating or understanding why they are failing to communicate”.³⁴ Pedersen also points to the danger of any group categorisation because that highlights and emphasises difference.³⁵

Categorisation of cultural groups raises awareness of differences. But such categorisation should not be allowed to be grounds for negative stereotypes and prejudices. It should assist in a cultural analysis of conflict with the aim of understanding the issues from the cultural point of view of the other party:

When each party can articulate the cause of conflict from the other’s viewpoint the cultural constructions of both conflict and peace will become more apparent. Combining cultural contexts can result in the construction of a unified and meaningful platform for discussion.³⁶

The danger of failing to recognise differences may arise from a general assumption that there is a universal culture, or from a tendency towards ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, although, language and perception cannot be universal, it may be possible to find common ground when differences in communication methods are understood.

Cultural awareness and conflict resolution

This section considers how cultural awareness may assist in improving cross-cultural communication. Being culturally aware is having an understanding of the role culture plays in communication and conflict. It is also important for conflict resolution practitioners and third parties to be aware of how differences in communication may impact upon the conflict resolution process. Processes that allow parties to engage in an uncontrolled conversation may encourage conversation on the basis of stereotypical beliefs, prejudices and ethnocentrism. Language difficulties may also impact negatively on the process.

Conflict resolution practitioners should be aware of personal assumptions and stereotypes which may cloud their judgment or move them to control the process to fit their perception of issues and parties, overtly or covertly. Conflict resolution practitioners may come to the conflict resolution process with personal assumptions, stereotypes and expectations about what a person from a particular culture is capable of doing or likely to do during the process. It is important that practitioners become

³³ Hall, n 3, p 205.

³⁴ Pedersen PB, *The Cultural Constructions of Conflict and Peace*, <http://www.suedweb.syr.edu/chs/pedersen/report/conflictandpeace.pdf> accessed 7 December 2005 p 12.

³⁵ Pedersen, n 34, p 12.

³⁶ Pedersen, n 34, p 15.

aware of the possibility that they hold such assumptions, and are also able to identify when the approach and style adopted by one of the parties is based on stereotypes and myths about the culture of the other party. LeBaron draws attention to the fact that stereotypes and assumptions “can limit the effectiveness of even a highly trained intervenor”.³⁷

Being culturally aware will also assist the conflict resolution practitioner to clarify ambiguous messages from one party to the other, rather than interpreting those messages on the basis of personal cultural perceptions. An awareness of the process of selecting out what is important in a conflict and interpreting those selections on the basis of cultural codes and norms is important for both conflict resolution practitioners and parties in conflict.

Conflict resolution practitioners may also need to limit the negative influence of stereotypes, prejudices and ethnocentrism if they occur in the resolution process. Accomplishing this task is likely to be a major issue for the conflict resolution practitioner. This may limit the current value placed on the neutrality in the conflict resolution field.³⁸ A low-interventionist attitude may prevent the conflict resolution practitioner from bringing to the attention of parties any words, actions and attitudes that are based on cultural assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices, and which may impact upon the effectiveness of the conflict resolution process. Although conflict resolution practitioners may be unable to change the parties’ attitudes, intervention may lead to an awareness of the impact of cultural constructions on the conflict and its resolution.

The possibility of the conflict resolution practitioner remaining neutral is furthermore challenged by the fact that “[e]veryone exists within his or her own worldview – an invisible, metaphorical sphere that shapes deeper levels of identity, meaning-making, and purpose”.³⁹ Conflict resolution practitioners are not immune to stereotyping and cultural myths.

It is possible for the conflict resolution practitioner to reframe the facts of a case on the basis of personally held cultural myths, bringing the practitioner into the conflict, and thus undermining the requirement of neutrality. How neutral can the practitioner be if personally held assumptions and stereotypes, beliefs and values – “negative taboos” – are brought into the process?⁴⁰ This is clearly a challenge for conflict resolution practitioners. They must be mindful of these issues and refrain from allowing such beliefs to negatively impact the process.

Where a social or economic power imbalance exists between the parties, the impact of stereotyping is likely to be greater, because the dominant party will be predisposed to view their perceptions and beliefs as legitimate. The situation can be even more complicated where the conflict resolution practitioner comes from the same cultural background as the dominant party. Gunning suggests that the solution in such a case is to emphasise the importance of equality to the parties:

In order to structure mediation so that it can work most of the time in favor of everybody, the value of equality must be introduced, injected when necessary.⁴¹

The conflict resolution practitioner should strategically inject the value of equality in an impartial way, in a manner that will not negatively impact on the conflict resolution process.

It has been suggested that in conflict resolution processes involving people from different cultural backgrounds, two conflict resolution practitioners of different cultural backgrounds should be involved to maintain equality and balance of power. One of the problems of certain types of cross-cultural conflict resolution is that third parties tend to be chosen from the dominant culture, and no matter how much they try to adhere to neutrality, there is likely to be a negative cultural assumption in the mind of the party from the non-dominant culture that the process will be unfair. It may therefore be desirable to appoint practitioners of the same cultural background as both of the parties.

³⁷ LeBaron M, *Bridging Cultural Conflicts: A New Approach for a Changing World* (Jossey-Bass, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2003) p 278.

³⁸ Gunning, n 20 at 55.

³⁹ LeBaron, n 37, p 273.

⁴⁰ Gunning, n 20 at 55.

⁴¹ Gunning, n 20 at 86.

It should be noted that coming from the same cultural background does not necessarily mean that values are shared, but having representatives of both sides “can play a valuable role in injecting equality values in a subtle way into the mediation process”.⁴² Where it is impossible to appoint practitioners from the same cultural backgrounds as the parties in conflict, it is important for conflict resolution practitioners to gather as much information as possible about the culture of each of the parties. This will assist in clearing any uncertainties and raising awareness of any stereotypical beliefs they might have about the group. Knowledge of the way messages are interpreted is also important.⁴³

Mindfulness

Cultural awareness alone is insufficient for cross-cultural communication and conflict resolution. The conflict resolution practitioner needs to be mindful of the parties’ cultural beliefs, practices, and interests and also be mindful of their own selves and of the communication process.⁴⁴ Fisher defines mindfulness as “ways in which ... mediators can enhance [their] presence [in the process] to increase the likelihood of conflict transformation”.⁴⁵ Bowling and Hoffman argue that “integration” is one of the qualities a conflict resolution practitioner (mediator) must bring into the conflict resolution process. Integration, according to Bowling and Hoffman is the “quality of being[,] in which the individual feels fully in touch”,⁴⁶ ie being connected to the parties, being mindful. When conflict resolution practitioners are mindful of the communication process, it becomes easier for them to identify cultural misperceptions, empathise with parties and avoid misinterpreting any behaviour which may appear “foreign”.

Empathy in communication involves “(a) carefully listening to others, (b) understanding others’ feelings, (c) being interested in what others say, (d) being sensitive to others’ needs, and (e) understanding others’ points of view”.⁴⁷ This should prevent culturally determined interpretation without regard for each party’s cultural beliefs. In addition, being integrated “enable[s] the mediator to be aware (and accepting) of the limitations of not only the parties’ partial (or ...distorted) views, but also his or her own partial views”.⁴⁸

Mindfulness will also require having an open mind. Refraining from judging others is important for effective communication and conflict resolution.⁴⁹ The ability to receive new information and new perspectives paves the way for finding a shared reality.

Recognition and respect

Finding shared values by being mindful and culturally aware requires recognition and respect for other cultures. Where a party fails, or refuses, to recognise the validity of methods of communication of a person from another culture, it is likely that the situation will lead to conflict or cause conflict to escalate.

Respect involves having regard for cultural differences and engaging in “differences constructively”.⁵⁰ Bowling and Hoffman use the term “congruence” to denote “genuineness” and “respect”. Congruence, according to Bowling and Hoffman is one of the qualities a conflict resolution

⁴² Gunning, n 20 at 89.

⁴³ Gudykunst, n 7, pp 175-177.

⁴⁴ Gudykunst, n 7, pp 30-32.

⁴⁵ Fisher T, “Beginner’s Mind: Cultivating Mediator Mindfulness” (2005) (Fall) *ACResolution* 28.

⁴⁶ Bowling D and Hoffman DA, “Bringing Peace into the Room: The Personal Qualities of the Mediator and their Impact on the Mediation” in Bowling D and Hoffman DA (eds), *Bringing Peace into the Room: How the Personal Qualities of the Mediator Impact the Process of Conflict Resolution* (Jossey-Bass, 2003) p 28.

⁴⁷ Gudykunst, n 7, pp 185-186.

⁴⁸ Bowling and Hoffman, n 46, p 40.

⁴⁹ Bowling and Hoffman, n 46, p 40. For a discussion on mindfulness for mediators, see Fisher T, “Who’s Minding the Mediator? Mindfulness in Mediation” (2003) 5(10) *ADR Bulletin* 165.

⁵⁰ LeBaron, n 37, pp 298-299.

practitioner must possess.⁵¹ To be genuine in this way means to refrain from all forms of prejudices, either subtle or overt. Genuineness also requires that respect must flow throughout the process, and that conflict resolution practitioners must seek to develop personal values in a consistent manner.⁵²

Respect for another culture does not necessarily mean an acknowledgment of the supremacy of that culture. Recognition means acknowledging that there are cultural differences and making room for those differences. Where this is achieved, it will be easier to find shared values, because recognition and respect will facilitate dialogue and positive interaction between the parties.

Mutual respect should encourage parties to be prepared to give up certain ideas and beliefs which are opposed to resolution and harmony. In this way, it will be easier for parties to challenge, within groups, traditions excluding and hurting other groups. As LeBaron points out, “change is constant and not all cultural traditions should be maintained”.⁵³ In certain situations, cultural changes will be necessary to achieve resolution. It should, however, be up to the parties to determine what changes are necessary and permissible within their cultural context.

Training

Cross-cultural competency training is very important for conflict resolution practitioners. The required training for conflict resolution practitioners in Australia is a 38-hour course provided by approved training providers.⁵⁴ It is expected to cover areas of competencies, including knowledge of “cross-cultural issues in mediation and dispute resolution”.⁵⁵ The mediation practice standards provide that cultural issues will be addressed during intake to ensure that mediation is appropriate for conflicts involving cultural issues.

Whilst the National Standards provide that mediators must have knowledge of cultural issues, there are no guidelines on the contents of such knowledge. In other words, training providers may teach knowledge and skills for cross-cultural understanding as they deem fit. Amongst other things, training providers must be able to create awareness in conflict resolution practitioners of how their own personal beliefs, assumptions and prejudices may influence the process.

Specialised courses are available in Australia on cultural aspects of conflict resolution.⁵⁶ Some of these programs alert trainees to their own cultural biases and assumptions, and how those might impact on the conflict resolution process. Skills are also taught to assist practitioners in dealing with cultural biases and assumptions that may impact negatively on the process, eg culture fluency and competency, listening, and mindfulness.

However, it is one thing to receive training, it is another to demonstrate competency in dealing with personal values which may sometimes impact on behaviour unconsciously. As Bowling and Hoffman argue, “mediators by their mere presence ... influence the parties”.⁵⁷ Conflict resolution practitioners must constantly reflect on their practice to ensure continuing competence in dealing with cross-cultural issues that may arise during conflict resolution.

⁵¹ Bowling and Hoffman, n 46, p 28.

⁵² Cloke K, “What are the Personal Qualities of the Mediator” in Bowling and Hoffman, n 46, p 55.

⁵³ LeBaron, n 37, p 299.

⁵⁴ Sourdin T, *Australian National Mediator Accreditation System: Report on Project* (2007) p 4. See also Attorney-General’s Department, *Australian National Accreditation Standards: Approval Standards for Mediators Seeking Approval under the National Mediator Accreditation System* (2007). In addition to the 38-hour training, mediators are required to undertake written and practical assessments before accreditation.

⁵⁵ Attorney-General’s Department, *Australian National Accreditation Standards*, n 54, p 10.

⁵⁶ Universities providing conflict resolution programs include units on cross-cultural conflict resolution in their curriculum; eg a unit entitled *Intercultural Conflict Resolution*, available at the University of Queensland.

⁵⁷ Bowling and Hoffman, n 46, p 21.

Conflict resolution practitioners must develop personal qualities, such as those discussed above, to assist in addressing cross-cultural issues, since personal qualities will undoubtedly impact, in some ways, on the process.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

This article has analysed cultural differences in the communication methods of different cultural groups. The fact of such differences highlights the difficulties that may be associated with conflicts between persons from different cultural backgrounds, and for a conflict resolution practitioner from a different cultural background to either of the parties involved. The enormous impact of culture on communication methods, and the link between communication and conflict, indicates the importance of an awareness of cultural patterns of communication.

Assumptions and generalisations about whole cultures must be treated with care, as individual differences within cultures can limit the applicability of such assumptions and generalisations. A general knowledge of cultural patterns will, however, form a basis on which conflict resolution practitioners can proceed, whilst bearing in mind the possibility of variance.

The article has also identified problems specifically relating to cross-cultural communication, namely, prejudice, stereotypes and ethnocentrism, and suggested ways in which the conflict resolution practitioner may assist in defusing such attitudes. But the conflict resolution practitioner must start with self-awareness. Recognising personally held prejudices and assumptions, and developing qualities such as cultural awareness, respect and recognition, and mindfulness are necessary to enhance competency, and should be promoted in training on cross-cultural conflict resolution.

⁵⁸ Bowling and Hoffman, n 46, p 46.