

Transforming conflict resolution education: applying anthropology alongside your students

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the role graduate students can play in transforming their education in the emergent field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, as occurs at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR), at George Mason University, Washington, DC. It also unpacks how anthropology plays a role in the education of these students at the Master's and Doctoral levels. The primary contribution of anthropology to the conflict resolution curriculum has been conceptual, around the notion of culture. Most of our MS graduates, and many PhDs, work in government or NGOs specialising in development, human rights or conflict resolution, coming from diverse backgrounds with mature life experiences and without prior training in anthropology. Only four of our 21 faculty are anthropologists. This article discusses why these diverse graduate students and their anthropological faculty viewed the traditional foundations of the field of conflict analysis and resolution as inadequate, and why it required an infusion of culture theory and understanding into their training and education.

KEYWORDS

transforming graduate education, applying anthropology, policy and culture, social conflict resolution

Introduction

This article describes how anthropology has played a role in educating and training students and future practitioners in conflict analysis and resolution by insisting on the importance of the concept of culture. Students themselves have played an important role in making culture a central concept in their education in our programme. This article also argues for

a broader conception of 'applied anthropology' to include the contribution that anthropology makes to educating non-anthropologists. After briefly describing the field of conflict analysis and resolution as it developed in the university, I focus on the specific contribution made by anthropology to our field, and then on the way students at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) encouraged and supported this process. I close the article by reflecting on some larger issues in the critical pedagogy of culture.

The development of conflict resolution education and practice

The field of conflict resolution is a very new one in higher education. The first department in peace and conflict research was established at the University of Uppsala in 1971, and the first post-graduate degree in peace studies at the University of Bradford, U.K., in 1973, its chair first occupied by the Quaker scholar-practitioner, Adam Curle. Although a journal devoted to the field (*The Journal of Conflict Resolution*) was launched in the U.S. in 1957, and its European counterpart (*The Journal of Peace Research*) in 1964, it was not until 1982 that an M.S. degree in conflict resolution was offered in a U.S. university. George Mason. Especially in the United States, the first curricula and overall conception of the nature of the field (both as an academic, research-based enterprise and as a field of practice) were heavily influenced by the main 'parent disciplines', international relations (IR) and social psychology, from which it drew its initial intellectual impetus.

What both parent disciplines lacked was recognition of the significance of socially organised and constituted *difference*, that is, a coherent concept of culture (Avruch 2000, 2007). From neo-realist international relations theory came the exclusive focus on states as unitary actors behaving rationally to calculate utilities (interests), to maximise power/security. From social psychology (especially from research on bargaining and negotiation) came the presumption that a pan-species human brain (and its corresponding cognitive processing) would transcend cultural difference in, say, decision making. Behind both international relations theories of states and world politics, and

social psychological theories of the individual actor, the authority of rational choice theory, with its restricted conceptions of motivation and intentionality as simply 'interests' and 'utilities' – and in negotiation research, by the reigning heuristic of the buyer-seller – effaced all other theories of mind or sociopolitical action, but in particular, culturally informed ones.

As for the practitioner side of things, most practitioners through the 1980s and early 1990s came from and worked in broadly North American, white, middle class and male-dominated settings. They mainly worked with people who shared their cultural assumptions about the world. When they did not, as in the case of minority race or ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Kochman 1981), social class (e.g., Merry 1990) or gender (e.g., Conley and O'Barr 2005: 39–59), they discounted the resulting 'turbulence' – in, say, a mediation session – as due to a surfeit of unprocessed anger or under-vented' emotions. In any case (as Kochman, Merry, and Conley and O'Barr all point out through their various analyses), in social encounters the practitioners could afford to ignore difference, as they held most of the cards.

This was the environment in which Peter Black and I worked in ICAR beginning in the early 1980s (Black and Avruch 1993). We oriented our teaching to educating our students about culture and cultural difference. We attempted to influence our colleagues and the emerging field to the extent we could by publishing less in anthropology journals than in peace studies and conflict resolution outlets (e.g., Avruch and Black 1987, 1991, 1993). We introduced to the field the now widely used notions of 'ethnoconflict theories' and 'ethno-praxes': ideas about the nature and causes of interpersonal or social conflict held as local knowledge by indigenous groups, as well as indigenous understandings of remedies and 'technologies' of conflict management or resolution. Supporting us in the realm of practice was the influential work of John Paul Lederach, a scholar-practitioner with wide cross-cultural experience who championed the idea that cultural outsiders working as third parties in a conflict ought to 'elicit' indigenous models and not simply 'prescribe' Western ones. Ideally, a creative integration of all relevant models and techniques, appropriate

to the cultural setting and 'owned' by the parties, would be the result (Lederach 1995).

In all this our graduate students were our allies and among our staunchest supporters. Before elaborating on this, I want to reflect on how, though neither Black nor I thought of ourselves as 'applied anthropologists', we were, in fact, applying anthropology to an evolving world of thought and practice.

Applying anthropology: three modalities

Anthropologists have long worked outside of academic departments of anthropology, most outside the academy entirely, but also as anthropologists in non-anthropology programmes or departments within the academy. There is a history of anthropologists in schools of medicine or education, and more recently in schools of business, management and public policy. What is interesting is that these 'academic' anthropologists often find themselves in schools or programmes essentially committed to teaching and training students towards some field of practice. In this sense, these anthropologists – whether or not they self-consciously identify as 'applied anthropologists' – are devoted in their research and teaching to *applying anthropology*. At the least, they are dedicated to ensuring that their students (who themselves are not likely ever to identify as anthropologists) 'apply anthropology', when and if they do, correctly and ethically. In aid of thinking through how anthropology 'gets applied' across a range of practice settings and by a variety of practitioners, it is useful to distinguish among different modalities of application. Understanding that these compartments are never watertight, there are at least three different ways in which anthropology can be *applied* to worlds of practice, both inside and outside the academy.

The first way is when an anthropologist acts to provide 'subject matter expertise' to a particular project, whether actual (say, a rural development or health-related project on the ground) or virtual (when the subject matter expert teams with a software development agent to build agent-based models or analysis). The subject matter expertise is often areal or ethnographic (linguistic) in nature, relating to a particu-

lar society or ethnic group, but it can also be topical, based on expert knowledge resulting from ethnographic inquiries, for example, about indigenous agricultural practices or ethnomedical beliefs as they may impact a development or health-related intervention.

The second sort of application for anthropology is methodological, those methods that derive generally from ethnographic inquiry. Of course – as applied anthropologists have pointed out from the very beginnings of the endeavour – the luxury of long-term residence and the ideal of Malinowskian participant-observation are rarely feasible. Some version of relatively ‘rapid assessment’ is the norm, often working in a team setting with colleagues from different disciplines, professional backgrounds and, often enough, worldviews. Not all methodologies useful for practical work come from orthodox ethnography, such as social impact assessment or participatory action research, and often applying anthropology requires rapid assessment more than academically-based research. Finally, of course, the applied anthropologist often works on smaller parts of larger projects, that is, on problems determined by others, in a contract setting specified by the ‘statement of work’.

What sets ethnography apart as a methodology is not so much a set of techniques as its underlying *rationale*: the commitment first to listening, and then valuing (if not always privileging) what your respondents tell you about their world and their experience of it. This is the hallmark of ethnographic inquiry, whether in an applied setting or not – a fundamental sensitivity to the intersubjectivities of fieldwork and ethnographic knowledge. Furthermore, ethnography is never a disembodied practice, but is anchored in some version of culture theory.¹

This brings us to the third way in which anthropology gets applied, through an infusion into education in non-anthropological disciplines, via culture theory.² This is especially true if one views education as itself being fundamentally a field of practice. Since 1982, the aim of the ICAR programme has been to turn out ‘reflective practitioners’ in conflict resolution.³ Few of the students have backgrounds in anthropology, and very few are interested in anthropology per se. Yet,

we anthropologists regard our roles as crucial to the work of ICAR. The goal of producing reflective practitioners matches up well with the ethnographer’s reflexive sensitivity to intersubjective encounters with ‘the other’, which characterises anthropological practice ‘in the field’. This reflexivity should characterise anthropological practice in the classroom. Here, the ‘other’ is your student.

Students’ role in transforming their education

Occasionally, the first two modalities of applying anthropology are relevant to instruction at ICAR. A student may want to work in a region where one of the anthropologists has ethnographic experience, or, as in the case of research on, for example, human rights, subject matter expertise. The doctoral-level ‘qualitative methods’ course has long been taught by one of the anthropologists on the faculty. But it is with regard to the third modality of culture theory that anthropology has been applied with greatest effect on the curriculum. The main issue here is not so much a ‘transformation of graduate education’ in an already existing field – political science or management or social anthropology – as it is the creation of a new and interdisciplinary field entirely.

For this reason, it would be a gross exaggeration to say that the anthropologists had to fight tooth-and-nail against conservative colleagues from other disciplines in ICAR. The point is that *all* of us faculty, by virtue of membership in ICAR, were committed to imagining a new interdisciplinary discipline, conflict studies and conflict resolution, so there has long existed an openness to different disciplinary ‘standards and norms’, an ethos that would have made disciplinary chauvinists feel both unwelcome and misplaced. ICAR’s curriculum feels as if it is constantly in a state of becoming rather than being an open-ended work-in-progress that often times is simply trying to keep up with developments in the field outside the academy.

In all this, our students played a large role. Curricular change in general (and not just in the area of culture) was not only driven from above by the professors, and in response to the field, from the outside, but also by our students. As in the case with faculty, it would be an

exaggeration to claim that students had to launch a subaltern assault to get their voices heard. More than in many traditional graduate social science departments, ICAR students could claim a platform from which to contribute to transforming their education, and thus the field in general. There were several reasons for this.

First, from its inception in 1982, the graduate programme intentionally sought students who were on average older than those in traditional social science programmes, because we valued life and work experience in the field – the ‘field’ broadly defined.⁴ Therefore, many students came to ICAR already somewhat practised in the field, and fundamentally as adults, and their own experience in the world made them skeptical of accepting as given the universalising tendencies, and generally economic thinking, of rational choice theory.⁵

Second, from its inception, we intentionally sought students from non-U.S. ‘conflict areas’, and much of our relatively meagre student financial support has gone towards supporting these non-American matriculants.⁶ Coming from different cultures, these students were far less likely to accept the idea that ‘everyone everywhere negotiates in the same way – one must merely speak [English] louder and slower’. For these students, the ethnocentrism of much traditional international relations or social psychology-based theory and practice was mistrusted and often (in the earlier curricula) a point of contention in classes. Our students pushed and pulled at the curriculum to introduce culture quite as much as we anthropologists did, and perhaps with greater effect. One of the ways in which they did this was simply by raising the issue of culture in class, in courses – say, on negotiation or mediation – where it was left out. A course focused on ‘ethnic and cultural factors in conflict resolution’ was added to the curriculum by the mid-1980s, and has remained popular and in demand ever since.

In fact, this student activism extended beyond asking for courses on culture and ethnic conflict. Our MS students in particular, who were going out into an uncertain world of employment in a still emergent field, pressured faculty to ensure that skills-based courses reflecting the needs of a developing field (in running focus groups, problem-solving workshops, facilitation, conflict resolution in schools, basic

programme management skills and so on) were taught by outside experts, often on a one-credit basis and weekend format.

Finally, the ‘culture’ of ICAR itself has long featured a tradition of active student involvement in governance – MS and PhD student representatives attend faculty board meetings and sit on the Curriculum Committee – as well as a vigorous organisation (Graduate Students in Conflict Studies, GSCS), and thus student voices were always heard. There were several reasons for this. The faculty tried ‘to practise what it preached’ in teaching conflict resolution: a commitment to open and collaborative ‘problem solving’, for example. The students expected this, and held us to our word (and deeds). The fact that they were on average older and more experienced ‘in the world’ than many graduate students supported this attitude, as perhaps did the fact that those interested in studying ‘conflict’ were not averse to engaging in some.

A particularly important way in which the students helped shape their own education involved an ICAR tradition, of forming ‘working groups’ outside of the course and classroom structure, where faculty members were invited as *primus inter pares*. Such groups reflected the interests of students in such topics as gender, human rights and culture, or were regionally focused – Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Balkans and Central Asia. Unlettered by formal curriculum-approval mechanisms, they lasted as long as interest sustained them. The Africa and Latin America working groups have been active for more than a decade. Sometimes working groups operated parallel to formal courses (on gender, for example) and extended their scope by mounting student-run conferences. Some ICAR courses began as working groups (on gender, on terrorism). Some working groups have produced edited books and monographs, for instance, one on local ‘zones of peace’ throughout the world (Hancock and Mitchell 2007).

More broadly, the enthusiasm among students (American and non-American) for bringing a cultural perspective to their ICAR education is perhaps best understood as part of their desire to see the emerging field of conflict analysis and resolution in general being opened up to other perspectives, particularly to indigenous or ‘non-Western’ approaches to understanding conflict and its resolution – to *ethnotheories* and

ethunopraxes as Avruch and Black (1991) originally conceived of the terms. In this sense, the demand for courses on culture, and indeed the eager acceptance of the entire discourse of culture, is one way in which students and faculty alike reach for the promise of a twenty-first century 'cosmopolitan conflict resolution' (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2005). In this students and faculty learn from the 'other' and strive to co-create a new field.

But creating a new field, especially one that claims to impact social life for the better, is not without pitfalls. Let me close the article by reflecting on the 'fate' of culture in conflict resolution, and a final caution about the role of culture in a *critical* conflict resolution education.

The 'fate' of culture in conflict resolution education

By the late 1990s, what can be called the 'missionising' goals of cultural education in conflict analysis and resolution had largely been reached.⁷ This was achieved not only at ICAR but also (in America) in strong masters-level programmes in Notre Dame, Eastern Mennonite University, Brandeis, and in the Maxwell School at Syracuse University (among others). In the U.K., at the University of Bradford, sensitivity to cultural difference, or at least a 'module' on culture, was part of the curriculum. This state of affairs is reflected as well in what is perhaps the most widely used text in the field (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2005). Moreover, as graduates of all these programmes entered the field as practitioners, and the field itself began to reflect a greater diversity of cultural backgrounds among those who populated it, the world of practice was also transformed in the direction of greater 'cultural competency', as, for example, this term has come to be used in government, professional nursing or education curricula.⁸

It is no exaggeration to say that many of the founding fathers and mothers of the field entered it (from more traditional social or behavioural science disciplines) because of strong political or moral commitments, against war as an instrument of foreign policy, in favour of nuclear disarmament, and more humane solutions to conflicts than sometimes come out of such adversarial processes as litigation. They were, in this sense, unapologetically applied social scientists. Their

greater hope was that one-day conflict resolution would be taken seriously by those 'in power' – by governments and courts and elected officials. One could say that their hope was that one-day conflict resolution would not simply be 'applied' to social conflicts, but would become part of a broader public policy discourse in approaches to social conflict – in effect, part of the political system, as John Burton put it (Burton 1990: 261–277).

Throughout the 1990s, conflict resolution gained some measure of credibility in the academy, judging at least by the rapid growth of courses in traditional political science or international departments, masters-level programmes that are specifically conflict resolution focused and undergraduate majors or concentrations. Outside the academy, particularly in the United States, the field grew and diversified as Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), particularly in the form of mediation. First, as part of a movement for judicial reform – clearing court dockets in an 'overly litigious American society' – some influential judges and law professors pushed programmes of court-affiliated mediation, which are now to be found in lower courts across the country. Second, Vice President Gore called for an expansion of ADR use in the U.S. federal government as part of his National Performance Review (Gore 1993: 119), and as a result, most U.S. federal agencies today utilise mediation (and certified mediators) in their human resources departments.⁹ All of this growth in turn provided jobs for the rising number of graduates in the field, and as the cultural dimensions of conflict resolution came to be more widely taught and appreciated, it was a rare graduate from one of these programmes (and increasingly even from schools of law or business) who would claim that everyone negotiates the same everywhere. And this growth and institutionalisation made it appear as if the earlier hope for transforming conflict resolution from being mainly a sort of technology that is applied to problems into a public policy by which problems are framed and conceptualised had been fulfilled.

But the old adage, 'be careful what you wish for', is now germane. Critics of ADR have long maintained that, as a public policy, it is merely, in Laura Nader's (2002) words, one of several 'hegemonic

processes in law' that denies equal access to justice to the poor, minorities and women. 'Concentrating on individual remedies ... it neglects macrostructural questions of power and inequality' (Avruch and Black 1996: 52). Moreover, as ADR professionals sought increasingly to export the form to other countries, often as one part of 'democracy training,' cultural issues once again came to the fore, but now – for those of us who educate the professionals, at least – with the added responsibility of 'teaching culture' critically, which is to say, teaching it as a concept that is infused with discourse around power and suffused with problems of representation. The Lebanese political scientist, Paul Salem, reflecting on the understanding of the phrase 'conflict resolution' in much of the Arab world today, indeed on the whole 'ideology of peace' as part of America's public diplomacy, writes that it smacks of neocolonialism and 'reinforces a status quo that is favorable to the dominant power' (Salem 1997: 11–12).

Even those of us with a conception of conflict resolution that is significantly different from ADR – a conception that involves seeking deeper solutions to structural problems underlying social conflicts (Avruch 2003a) – cannot escape these issues. Elsewhere, I have written on the ethical precariousness of extra-cultural third parties – outsiders – to disputes, who fail to recognise the political uses of culture by certain disputants (Avruch 2003b). Here I cite Unni Wilkan's work on the plight of Asian Muslim women in Norway, where the authorities have been reluctant to intervene strongly in domestic conflicts lest they appear racist or disrespectful of Muslim 'culture'. Wilkan cites the case of a Norwegian-Pakistani woman, Nasim Karim, who survived a forced repatriation to Pakistan, marriage and severe beatings before finding asylum in a Norwegian embassy. She returned to Norway and became a social activist on behalf of immigrant and refugee women and children, and, in an address, challenged the Norwegian parliament: 'When a man is subject to violence it is called torture, but when a woman is subject to violence, it is called culture' (Wilkan 2002: 107).

In conflict resolution we have a field unburdened by the 'dead hand of tradition.' In a field of study and practice that is very much still

emergent, the voices of students – and alumni – play a special role. Students did not work to bring anthropology *per se* into their curriculum, but rather to bring a conception of culture that provided them a language to understand significant social difference. Given their backgrounds, they often bring the 'real world' of practice into the classroom, and the active research of our PhD students can move us to reconceptualise theory in light of this world. And in this interaction faculty themselves have a special responsibility. As conflict resolution truly becomes part of public policy, it is more important than ever that culture be taught as critically as public policy itself must be (Shore and Wright 1997; Wedel et al. 2005). Students cannot simply be taught to be culturally sensitive or competent. Students as future practitioners must be encouraged to ask: 'Who claims to represent "culture" here? Who owns it? How is the notion being used?' Here perhaps is a fourth 'modality' for applying anthropology to conflict resolution education, one that applied anthropologists especially have long understood: the modality of ethics and the commitment to ethical practice.

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Notes

1. Simon Roberts (2006) has written insightfully about what happens when ethnography is 'unbound' (my 'disembodied') from an underlying anthropology (my theory of culture), and becomes merely one of a number of 'brands' available to researchers in, say, marketing or commerce.
2. Elsewhere, I have discussed some inadequate ideas of culture with respect to their use in conflict resolution. Six common inadequate ideas are that culture is homogenous or undifferentiated; that it is a 'thing', reified and essentialised; that it is uniformly distributed in a population; that an individual possesses a single, defining culture; that it is reducible to custom; and that it is timeless and changeless (Avruch 1998: 14-16). For an example of such inadequate ideas applied broadly and with tremendous confidence to economic and political 'development', see the essays (Richard Shweder's excepted) in *Culture Matters* (Harrison and Huntington 2000).
3. On reflective practice generally, see Schön 1983.
4. For some it meant previous work in traditional conflict resolution or peace-oriented NGOs, or in aid and development, in human rights, in women's shelters, in the U.S. Peace Corps or the military; we also regularly welcomed a number of recovering attorneys.
5. The requirement to take the U.S. Graduate Record Exam (GRE) was dropped several years ago, after finding that it did not predict success for future practitioners, did not reflect the capacities and 'human capital' our older students brought with them, and hampered out getting the best and most committed foreign students.
6. George Mason is a public university and a new one, and, compared with private institutions or even older and better-endowed public ones, we operate (even in good times for public education, an increasingly rare thing) on thin margins.
7. In retrospect, it helped that neither Black nor I came out of the legal anthropology or Law and Society traditions, as scholars here were often more critical of the potential (and in some cases, the intentions!) of conflict resolution as a field of discursive practice. Their critiques, on the other hand, have certainly informed our work.
8. For one formal definition, see: www.epa.gov/evaluate/glossary/c-esd.htm
9. Mediation has also taken hold strongly in the World Bank, where personnel conflicts often take on intercultural dimensions.

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