In Practice

Like Talking to a Brick Wall: Implications of Emotion Metaphors for Mediation Practice

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In this article, the authors discuss the role of emotions in mediation with the goal of providing practical insights that can improve the mediation process. Their assumption is that emotion is ever-present, particularly in conflict, and that acknowledging and addressing underlying emotions facilitates conflict transformation during the mediation process.

Addressing Emotions in the Heat of Mediation

Many mediators recognize the importance of emotion and explore parties’ emotions as part of the mediation process. However, surprising as it may sound, we have spoken with mediators who have told us that they find emotions “irrelevant” to parties who are only interested in reaching a settlement. These mediators have argued that exploring emotions just escalates tension and de-rails productive discussion. In addition, even when a mediator does recognize the importance of emotion in the mediation...
context, he or she may not have the necessary tools for confronting emotion productively in the heat of an actual mediation.

We gleaned some insights about emotions in the context of mediation practice by conducting an opening exercise as part of an advanced mediator training in the spring of 2005 (Jones and Bodtker 2001). We placed participants in groups, gave each group a card with an emotion word written on it, and asked the participants to complete two sentences:

• "(This emotion) is like _____."
• "(This emotion) is like ____ in mediation."

Each group developed a series of metaphors describing how they experienced a particular emotion in their personal lives and in their work, as well as how those emotions affect them as mediators. They then discussed ways of dealing with these emotions during a mediation session. We were so impressed with the quality and level of detail in participants’ responses that we decided to share these insights with other mediators (and negotiators) who might gain from these ideas as well.

The twenty mediators who participated in this exercise were a diverse group in terms of gender, race, religion, age, and profession, but they all lived within the same geographic region, so the responses they generated may not be equally useful for all groups of mediators. Nonetheless, we believe that this discussion generates some interesting and important insights for six essential emotions — anger, guilt, shame, sadness, pride, and contempt — that often arise in the conflict-filled situations that mediators must confront.

**Anger**

As every mediator knows, parties in mediation often blame each other, and anger is one of the most commonly experienced emotions during a conflict. Our participants generated a wealth of anger metaphors. To them, anger is a "flash," "wind," "simmering teapot," "bullet," "bear," "tornado," "drowning," and "having amnesia." Many of these descriptions have clear and obvious connotations: a *simmering teapot* is ready to "blow off steam"; a *bullet* is unstoppable and can inflict great pain and damage — you cannot take it back, and it has tremendous force. Anger is a *flash* that can come on quickly and without warning; and, a *bear* that can be frightening and dangerous. One metaphor we heard that seemed less predictable to us, and thus a bit more intriguing, was anger as "*having amnesia.*" We decided to explore further the implications of this metaphor with the group.

The amnesia image suggests that the brain in question is not working as it should. An amnesiac feels panic and a loss of control. This metaphor suggests that when we are angry, we can lose control and fail to recognize the damage we might inflict on others. We might "forget" the history and significance of our relationship with the other party and what we have invested in it. We cannot see the "big picture," which reduces our ability
to manage cognitive complexity, to see nuance, or to perceive another person's point of view.

A disputant's anger creates several challenges for the mediator. The anger may be difficult to detect, especially if the disputant comes from a collectivist culture that promotes harmony over individualism. Disputants may also be reluctant to show anger if they are trying to win the mediator's sympathy or are acting in accordance with accepted workplace norms. Many of the metaphors suggest that disputants may fear their own anger precisely because they worry that they cannot control it.

In keeping with the metaphor of anger as having amnesia, we suggest some techniques mediators can use to help the disputant feel more in control and aware of things that anger might cause him or her to miss or to forget. They include the following:

- **Take an opportunity to caucus privately and explore the possibility of anger with the party individually.** This may be less threatening for both parties, as the target of the anger is unlikely to be comfortable with its expression in joint session. While working with the party privately, you may be able to determine the underlying sources of the disputant's anger.

- **Identify the disputant's current attributions of the other party's behavior.** Anger often results when one party blames the other party for blocking him or her from achieving his or her goals. The mediator can help the party identify external or situational variables that may mitigate the anger directed at the "offending" party.

- **Help the angry party to see the conflict in its true complexity.** This involves getting the disputant to reflect on his or her interdependence and relationship with the other party. It requires taking a future orientation that asks the disputant to consider what type of relationship he or she wants to have and how he or she can get there.

- **Talk about the anger and reappraisal of anger in joint session — if the disputant is comfortable with this.** Even if the disputant did not actually express her anger in the mediation session, the other party may have perceived it, either previously or through nonverbal cues. Because the target of the anger might also feel angry, intimidated, or scared, it is best if the anger can eventually be discussed in the open, especially if the mediator has helped the disputant think through his or her anger and he or she is willing to acknowledge that his or her anger may have been unfair or misdirected. Acknowledging this may improve communication and help the parties to reach agreement.

**Guilt**

Guilt, as we know all too well, occurs when someone believes that he or she has done something wrong — with only himself or herself to blame.
Participants reported that guilt is “an internal nagging,” “a hamster on a treadmill” (people take it on and get stuck in an unproductive cycle, “spinning endlessly on a wheel”), a “hot potato” (people want to pass it along to someone else). Because guilt is a self-conscious emotion, the “guilty party” is often inwardly focused. Paradoxically, to alleviate our feelings of guilt, we often focus on meeting the other party’s needs, which can cause us to make concessions or accept agreements that may not be in our best interests and weaken our bargaining position.

These metaphors suggest the following mediator techniques for addressing guilt in a mediation session:

- **Get the hamster off the treadmill.** The hamster must be distracted (or become bored) to get off the treadmill. In mediation, the mediator may have to help the party to see that he or she is not getting anywhere by ruminating on his or her guilt.

- **Explore the significance of the transgression.** The mediator may need to explore why the party feels guilty and the significance (or existence) of the transgression. Again, it may make sense to protect the party by helping the party to explore his or her feelings of guilt privately. The mediator can acknowledge the transgression and validate the party’s experience of guilt (if necessary) or help the party to reappraise his or her guilt if, in fact, it is unwarranted. The mediator can do some “reality testing” to help the disputant evaluate the significance of the transgression and determine ways to alleviate the burden that do not include making unwise concessions.

**Shame**

We feel shame when we perceive that we have behaved badly. Like guilt, we blame ourselves for the wrongdoing, but the judgment is more global. Shame imbues us with feelings of unworthiness, creating the need for massive reparations, not just a quick fix. A person in shame needs to restore his or her diminished identity (Jones 2000; Jones 2006; Jones and Bodtker 2001).

Participants compared shame to a “soft-boiled egg,” “cowering in the corner,” being “under the covers,” being buried in “quicksand,” and being “an ant in the Parthenon.” In explaining these metaphors, participants said that shame generates a desire to hide or a fear of being discovered, a desire to cover up or become invisible. With the quicksand metaphor, participants indicated that shame is being stuck in the quicksand, and the harder one struggles to get out, the deeper one sinks. We originally conceived of the “ant in the Parthenon” metaphor as a variation of wanting to hide, but participants pointed out that an ant in the Parthenon is very vulnerable; the ant feels insignificant, small, and paralyzed because movement may reveal its location to a predator.
What can a mediator do to deal with feelings of shame that arise during a mediation session? We suggest the following:

- **Do not call attention to feelings of shame in a joint session.** Bringing shame into the open could create even more shame, which could cause a disputant to withdraw.

- **Bolster the disputant's self-esteem,** perhaps by helping her to identify other sources of the conflict (e.g., situational variables the disputant has no control over and thus cannot be blamed for). If you are able to identify the source of the shame, find "evidence" in other areas of her life that contradict her "global" sense of worthlessness.

- **Actively help the disputant suppress or deny feelings of shame.** While the disputant may need to deal with those emotions at another time, they are unlikely to help the parties move beyond an impasse, and the mediator must redirect the conversation along more productive lines. If the mediator recognizes a disputant is unable to participate in the conversation or is giving up too much power (conceding too easily), this may call for a private caucus to further explore these issues.

- **Help the disputant focus on a specific issue, rather than self-condemnation.** That is, help her experience guilt over a specific transgression, rather than a much larger sense of shame. This should help her identify specific actions she can take to repair that transgression.

**Sadness**

Disputants feel sadness when they lose something important to them, when they have no one to blame for the loss, and when they do not believe anything can be done to replace that loss (Jones 2006).

Participants compared sadness to a “gray day,” “wet blanket,” “dead weight,” an “albatross,” a “minor violin chord.” Participants also described the resignation, depression, gloom, feelings of helplessness, and hopelessness that they associate with sadness. We expanded on the “gray day” metaphor to encompass the sense that when we are sad, cloudiness obstructs our vision — we lack direction and feel disoriented.

We suggest the following techniques for overcoming sadness in a mediation session:

- **Do not minimize the disputant’s sadness with platitudes.** Mediators may need to acknowledge and validate the disputant’s sadness and they should give the disputant time to grieve whatever he or she has lost in the conflict (a property, a business, a marriage, a job, an opportunity) — as much as he or she would grieve the loss of a loved one. The mediator should avoid mindless platitudes like “you will get over it” or “time will heal.”
• Acknowledge, validate, and honor the disputant’s experience. In response to the loss of a loved one, the mediator might say, “He sounds like a wonderful person . . . I know how much you will miss him. Have you thought about what he would want you to do in this situation?” In response to the loss of an honor or position, the mediator could say, “That was quite an accomplishment, it will always be on your record, and you should be proud. Have you thought about ways in which you could build on that accomplishment in the future?” These kinds of statements do not minimize the disputant’s sense of loss, but rather they honor the relationship or accomplishment itself. They also help to ground the disoriented disputant by placing the loss in a larger frame of reference, subtly pointing out that the disputant’s life and experience extend beyond his or her loss.

• Use a caucus to “be with” a party experiencing sadness. Sharing time in silence and/or providing nonverbal recognition of the disputant’s pain might be the best way to communicate empathy.

Pride
Pride is not a negative emotion — unlike the others we have discussed so far. It can, however, have detrimental effects on the mediation process. Pride suggests feelings of high self-worth or self-esteem. Cultural norms regarding the appropriateness of displaying pride vary and thus can result in negative perceptions of others displaying what may be considered “inappropriate” levels of pride.

Participants compared pride to wearing “a crown.” A “simple” crown can be seen as a positive symbol of positive self-worth, but one that is too heavily adorned may be seen by others as ostentatious. Like symbols of wealth, too much pride may inspire jealousy, anger, or contempt, and become too “heavy” for the individual to support. Participants also suggested that an overly adorned crown may reflect a person’s desire to camouflage his feelings of insecurity or low self-worth.

To deal with pride in a mediation session, we recommend the following:

• Mediators must be particularly aware of how expressions of pride may affect their own impartiality. A mediator who perceives an inappropriate level of pride may become biased during a mediation session. Mediators should also be aware that, by expressing pride, the disputant may be attempting to compensate for feelings of shame, guilt, or unworthiness, and this may need to be addressed in caucus if it is getting in the way of productive discussion.

• Mediators should be aware of the impact of pride on other disputants. Pride can arouse feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness, or
conversely, may anger the other party and cause him to seek retribution to "bring the other party down a notch."

- **Consider the timing of pride displays.** The timing of a prideful display may also affect its interpretation, especially in mediations where one party can be identified as the "offender" and the other as the "victim." For example, if an offender displays pride at the beginning of the session, he may be perceived as arrogant and unrepentant. If the victim displays pride at the beginning of the session, he may be perceived as fabricating the violation. On the other hand, if each party displays pride at the conclusion of the session, it might indicate that a true resolution has been accomplished.

- **Legitimize pride in a way that is more palatable to other disputants.** Acknowledge the disputant's sense of pride in what they do. For example, a mediator might say "I can see you take great pride in how you do your job," or "I see that your values are very important to you." In this way, the mediator may be able to legitimize a disputant's sense of pride (i.e., his ability to act consistently with his value system) in a way that makes it easier for the other disputant to hear. This is where a mediator's ability to reframe can be an advantage.

### Contempt

To feel contempt is to feel morally superior to another, and one usually expresses contempt by denigrating the other. Contemptuous communication that belittles the other party leads to defensiveness and is a key contributor to conflict escalation.

One participant suggested that one is "talking to a brick wall" when dealing with someone who feels contempt. It is hard to get through to someone who feels contempt, and, as one participant said, "it hurts if you run into it." The person who feels contempt has barriers around him or her, he or she is inaccessible and superior. Another metaphor used for contempt was one of "erosion." Contempt is a major storm that can erode the foundation of a relationship. It was explained as one person distancing herself from others to the point where she is unable to relate to them. Similarly, the target of contempt also feels as though she is being "eroded." Another participant suggested that feeling another's contempt is like "acid" eating away at you. Clearly, contempt is a particularly challenging emotion for mediators (and disputants) to manage.

We suggest the following techniques for dealing with contempt in a mediation session:

- **Use "ground rules" to reduce the opportunity for personal attacks.** While some mediators hesitate to enforce or suggest rules for behavior in mediation, allowing parties to directly attack or belittle each other rarely leads to improved communication or a successful agreement.
Violations of the mediation process should result in a decision to caucus or halt the mediation process.

- *Scale the wall and rise above it.* This is no easy task and may require skillful reframing on the mediator's part. As with pride, the mediator should try to honor the disputant's identity while using the disputant's control over the process to make sure that statements of contempt are reduced or reframed in the mediation session.

- *Allow the target of the contempt to "scale the wall" on her own.* In some cases, a disputant may have the confidence to "be the bigger person" by displaying her own power and thus earning the other's respect. The mediator needs to pay attention to determine to what extent a disputant can manage this on his or her own. On the other hand, the mediator may need to step in to make sure power does not swing too far to the side of the disputant expressing contempt.

The strategies that a mediator might use for contempt are similar to those of pride: acknowledge the underlying identity issue — the disputant's need to feel he or she is good, worthy, justified — without condoning the denigration of the other. A mediator may also find himself or herself the target of contempt if a party is feeling frustrated during the mediation session. Comments such as "What do you know about it?" or "What good are you if you can't decide who is right?" may trigger defensiveness in the mediator. The best response to such contemptuous attacks is to acknowledge the frustration being felt by the participant, and then remind participant of the mediator's role as a facilitator who is there to help the parties improve communication with each other and create a mutually satisfactory agreement on their own.

**Concluding Thoughts**

While this article is not an exhaustive discussion of emotion in the mediation process, we wanted to share some insights into the experience of certain emotions as expressed through metaphors and present potential implications for mediators struggling with how to deal with disputants perceived as "emotional." We find it interesting that parties in conflict will often say "I can't work with him/her, he/she is too emotional," when what they probably mean is that they do not understand why the party is reacting the way that he or she is, and that it impedes their communication.

Because we contend that all conflict is inherently emotional, it stands to reason that an effective, long-term agreement will only come about when underlying issues — usually those related to the relationship or the parties' feelings of identity and self-worth — have been adequately addressed. It must, therefore, be in our best interests as mediators to spend some time exploring our own and others' emotional experiences and increasing our comfort level with outward expressions of emotion in conflict.
NOTES

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1. We acknowledge that in this exercise we asked for a simile, yet the in-depth discussion that followed allowed us to engage in a sensemaking activity where the similes functioned as metaphors participants use to make sense of their emotions.

REFERENCES