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Enhancing the Skills
and Identity
of Cultural Mediators
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Being an Intercultural Mediator: A transformative journey of learning and reflective practice in lived social spaces

Mediation: a new social space

This presentation will focus on mediation and the very notion of intercultural mediator in a postmodern world. Mediation is the process of intercultural transformation for all parties involved and also a learning resource in newly constructed spaces of social interactions. Mediation refers to an intercultural spatiality (the socially produced space (Lefebvre 1991), which is not static but constitutive of social relations (Rick, 1997). Here it is useful to adopt Lefebvre’s unitary theory of space (1991), which brings together all its elements, namely i) the physical (real/material) or perceived space, ii) the mental (imagined/conceptual) or conceived space and iii) the social or lived space (Rick, 1997, pp. 10-12). The social or lived space is a new “site where our perceived and conceived notions of space meet, are contested, combined and altered” (Skordoulis & Arvanitis, 2008, p.108).

Mediation lies its premises on the notion that every interpersonal communication could be perceived as an intercultural one due to the diversified lifeworlds (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012) of participants involved. These lifeworlds are shaped by participants’ multidimensional personalities. These personalities have an enormous impact on participants’ engagement in any communication circumstance. In supporting this, it is important to adopt a broader definition of diversity as in modern conditions of

increasing global interconnectedness, differences are subtle and complex and shape people's personalities and life histories in unique ways. Kalantzis & Cope (2012) call for a more inclusive approach to diversity in order to include dimensions of differences such as material (differences of social class, geographical locale and family), corporeal (differences of age, race, sex and sexuality, and physical and mental capacities) and symbolic (socially constructed realities of culture or ethnicity, language, gender, affinity and persona). In other words, they define diversity in broader terms to include the whole realm of everyday life experiences which they called the lifeworld (a set of habits, behaviors, values and interests which are implicitly present because they "seem so obvious to insiders that they don't need saying" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p.138-139).

Thus, people with diverse lifeworlds engage in perpetual intercultural communicative actions in every aspect of their interpersonal communication. They are doing so by using negotiation and sensitivity on (cultural) differences in such aspects as: cultural styles, orientation to space and time, gender differentiation or power distances. The basis for a successful intercultural communication lies in the emotional competence, empathy and intercultural sensitivity.

Furthermore, the mediation process is a unique convergence where newly formed spatialities and temporalities, as well as the participants' lifeworld constructs of values, beliefs and principles come together. It is a newly formed social or lived space of engagement where mediators assist parties to understand one another and to be aware of bias towards process, persons, behaviors and outcomes. The way by which mediators shape this new intercultural space to create "a larger third culture context" (Townsend, 2002) that is highly inclusive of the participants' lifeworlds, determines their success and perceived acceptability.

Mediator: The Intercultural learner & reflective practitioner

In this context, intercultural mediator can be any person who works/communicates with people who are different from each other by way of social status, ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, age or sexual orientation. We could assert here that overall the intercultural mediator is both a reflective practitioner who provides services along a broad spectrum of diversity including cultural differences and an intercultural learner who communicates and liaises for cross-purposes.

More specifically, a mediator acts as an intercultural learner who, according to Townsend, (2002), enters "a contested space amid a complex, setting of interests, values, beliefs and behaviors". In this intercultural space new traits of sociability (new relations and communication patters) are developed. Mediators are transformative learners who in fact maintain a multiple foci or perspective of both their required skills as well as in the mediation process itself. They engage in a journey of personal and cultural transformation in which they feel they belong maintaining at the same time their professional impartiality. The intercultural "mediator's skills, sensitivity,

awareness (of self and others) and patience will be summoned to the forefront of this whirling space of conflicting behaviors, substantive jousting, contesting statements and adversarial accusations” (Townsend, 2002).

Jon Townsend (2002) described the following five intercultural principles and mediation practices, which create an operational intercultural space of mutual understanding, empathy and collaborative ethos using culturally appropriate behaviors. These principles are:

1. **Flexibility**; namely the “mental elasticity” that allows mediators “to be a part of and yet apart from the cultural milieu into which they have entered”. Attributes associated with this principle are wonder, awe or creativity.
2. **Tolerance**, namely the ability to resist the effects of prejudice in regards to the views, beliefs and practices of others. “Transparency, empathetic understanding and ethnorelative valuing” are some of the attributes associated with this principle.
3. **Hope, namely the ability to act as a positive role-model** providing pathways for the participants to enter in a transformative journey of exploration of the unknown and the unfamiliar.
4. **Respect and reciprocity which** “allows the mediator to realize that process is negotiable” based on a reciprocal and reflective dialogue, and that in order to acknowledge and understand the participants’ cultural beliefs and values, the cultural/communicative protocols of engagement must be made explicit and discussed by all parties involved in an inclusive context, which values and reflects the cultural needs and values of the parties.
5. **Inquisitiveness to learning, namely the ability and willingness to learning** (“[L]earning about one’s self, about others, about how others see themselves”). Mediators serve as a bridge between their own lifeworld and the life histories and cultures of others. They are also keen to know “why” and “how”.

At this point it is important to note that all intercultural mediators ought to be constantly aware of and move away from their personal ethnocentrism (the sense that one’s own ethnic culture is superior to all others) and ensure that other parties do so. Also mediators should constantly strive to move towards a more ethnorelative or inclusive understanding and practice (the premise “that cultures cannot be judged or evaluated from a single or absolute ethical or moral perspective”) (Townsend, 2002). Clearly their role in mediation reflects a long, dynamic and evolving process of transformation and learning where reciprocity, negotiation, critical reflection and retrospective takes place.

On the other hand, intercultural mediators are reflective practitioners who are trained to engage in intercultural learning and action, but also possess a multifaceted Intercultural Competence (knowledge, skills and attitudes) enriched by personal experiences and reflection. Intercultural competence (Council of Europe, 2011 and

Stier, 2006) is defined by the ability not only to successfully communicate with people from other cultures, namely an ability for cultural exchange, interaction and symbolism), but to negotiate with the whole spectrum of diversity (one's lifeworld) and otherness (collective ethnic groups' identity). Thus, intercultural competence is a social skill of establishing and maintaining relationships, effective communication and collaborative outcomes), and must be approached in an interdisciplinary way. It also encompasses analytical skills of the global society, reflection, acceptance of ambiguity, risk taking, empathy, intercultural awareness, and capacity to transform the context of reflective modernity (Arvanitis, 2011). These abilities mean that a person is able to perceive and understand the cultural differences that affect thoughts, emotional feelings and actions.

Intercultural Competence

More specifically, intercultural knowledge in the mediation process refers to: i) awareness/knowledge of different cultural framework(s), culturally shaped norms and cultural circumstances (facts of history, behavioral patterns, values, principles, symbols, traditions, roles, etc.) and expectations, which explain participants' different perspectives. ii) self-awareness, namely the ability to recognize one's own cultural influences and their possible effect in mediation and iii) multi-cultural perspectives such as ability to recognize, understand and appreciate culturally-shaped perspectives, behaviors and events as well as the ability to manage ambiguities in multi-cultural situations in order to facilitate communication and reciprocity (International Mediation Institute, 2010 and Arvanitis, 2011).

Furthermore, intercultural skills refer to i) the ability to manage and apply intercultural knowledge through the use of interdisciplinary working methods, ii) the ability to use information and multimodal expressions and communication styles. Here it is important for mediators to be able to adjust their own communication style to participants' respective cultural styles, and to help participants to communicate optimally with each other. and iii) demonstration of creative and critical skills in the mediation process such as intrapersonal (perspective alternation, problem solving, self-reflection, etc.) and interpersonal skills (use of body language , non - verbal patterns, symbols, etc.), ability to identify possible cultural patterns, which may hinder mediation and design potentially appropriate interventions. Overall successful mediators have the ability to manage the mediation process and adapt it accordingly to ensure reciprocal settlement and compliance. Examples related to mediation (see <http://imimediation.org/intercultural-certification-criteria>) can be communication styles (e.g. emotional expressiveness or otherwise), mindset toward conflict (how participants may prefer to negotiate), orientation toward exchanging information (transparent – non-transparent and fact related – non-fact related), time orientation & perspective (deadlines, deliverables, punctuality time pressure- no time pressure), decision-making approaches (norms based – subjective, interests-based, individualist or collectivist).

Finally, intercultural attitudes refer to the intercultural awareness and commitment to universal human values and rights as well as the adoption of a positive and inclusive attitude for effective communication, active participation, collaboration, compromise and adaptation (Arvanitis, 2011).

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, mediators who demonstrate advanced intercultural competence and skills can manage both diversity and cultural differences (e.g. different perception of time¹⁷ or gestures¹⁸) in an effective way. In relation to the latter the mediation process may involve conflicting cultural attributes such as individualism vs collectivism; femininity vs masculinity; different sense of security (need for more or less rules), hierarchy or power, multi-tasking approach vs mono-tasking approach, orientation and understanding of time and space, non-verbal vs verbal communication in response to a particular situation (See http://en.wikimeditation.org/index.php?title=Intercultural_mediation).

Negotiating with these differences intercultural mediators function as a bridge between participants in the mediation process and all together they shape new social grounds based on mutual understanding, relationships of reciprocity and effective communication patterns. This is a newly formed intercultural social space, which is constructed and lived by all parties involved in multiple, inclusive and engaging ways.

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¹⁷ "In China and Japan is rather oriented towards the past (ancestors, values); in the Mediterranean countries and South America the orientation is more directed toward the present while the United States as Europe give more importance to the future (the degree of industrialization often determine orientation for the future)" (See http://en.wikimeditation.org/index.php?title=Intercultural_mediation).

¹⁸ "In India a nod from right to left means an affirmation ("yes"), while a movement of head from up to down means a refusal ("no"); A thumb up means "everything is alright" in America while in Central Europe it has more the meaning of the number "one". In Iran, it is an impolite gesture, equivalent to the dirty finger in most other cultures; Another gesture for "everything is alright" is, for certain professions such as pilots and plunger, the thumb and point finger shaping a "O". This same gesture means for the Japanese "now we can talk about money" while in the south of France it means on the contrary: "Not a penny". In Spain and in several South American countries, in Eastern Europe and Russia, it is a vulgar expression; In Japan, the smile / laugh can be a sign of embarrassment and confusion. During meetings, they like having silent breaks of several minutes. In Europe and America, these behaviours cause more uncertainty. The word "compromise" in England has a positive connotation (like an agreement, something good that happens to the both parties). On the contrary in the United States, this word means more a solution in which both parties lose. When someone is invited and leaves right after the dinner, this means in China that the guests have loved the meal (still waiting would lead the hosts to believe that the guests have not eaten enough). However, in Canada, the United States and various European countries, the hosts expect the guests to stay and discuss, otherwise the hosts could think, if they left right away, they would have come just to eat" (See http://en.wikimeditation.org/index.php?title=Intercultural_mediation).

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