
"The Psychology of Mediation:
Issues of Self and Identity and the IDR Cycle"
(Abstract)

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It is well established that issues of self and identity play an important role in mediation. Put simply, most people take the conflict personally, and the outcome of the mediation as a reflection of who they are. This article explores this phenomenon, and the role it plays in mediation.

Section I of this article reviews the thinking of a number of leading psychoanalytic developmental theorists regarding the development of the sense of self and identity. These theorists consistently point to the importance of developing the capacity for a reality-based and objective, yet ideally also self-reflective, sense of self and other; this is especially important during conflict. Stated in practical terms, those who are able to function with adequate objectivity about themselves and others — or who can be encouraged to do so — will be better able to resolve conflicts in mediation.

In Section II, perspectives from neuroscience and certain spiritual teachings on the nature of self and self-identity are presented. The conventional understanding of the self is undercut by these perspectives. Scientists have been unable to find a "self" within the human brain. From a spiritual perspective, the "ego" is largely seen as an

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illusion. Integrative perspectives that attempt to locate the self both inside and outside traditional perspectives are also discussed.

In mediation, the ego is a psychological reality. Yet it is also true that parties in mediation can either identify with their bargaining positions to a greater degree, or to a lesser degree. The views of the self discussed in Section II, especially those which emphasize the importance of the capacity to release ego-based identifications, may assist mediators in one of their most important tasks: helping parties realize that the value of their identities is not dependent upon, and should not be linked to, the outcome of the negotiation.

Section III deals with the mediator's own issues of self and identity. The importance of the mediator's skill in dealing with her own narcissistic issues is emphasized. Also discussed is the usefulness of meditation to help the mediator deepen her capacity for interpersonal presence and model a deeper, more authentic sense of self during the mediation.

Section IV builds on previous sections to describe "the IDR cycle," which is a pattern of narcissistic inflation, deflation and resolution that often occurs in mediation. At the outset of the IDR cycle, parties experience a type of narcissistic inflation as they plan to enter the mediation. As the mediation continues, and contact with the other parties and the mediator intensifies, there is inevitably a kind of deflation. Finally, they learn to hold the varying views of the situation in mind, and to weigh choices. This is akin to what Peter Fonagy and his colleagues refer to as "reflective functioning," and what Margaret Mahler and her colleagues call "object constancy."

In some cases, the process involves a renegotiation of identity. Faced with the painful, practical dilemmas inherent in the conflict, the parties begin to realize

their situation is exacerbated by the linkage in their minds between the outcome of the mediation and their identities. Under the pressure of the conflict, and hopefully with appropriate assistance from the mediator, they manage to cut the link between the two. This release of an aspect of ego-identity is a significant psychological and practical achievement. It is a "critical moment," if not *the* critical moment in the mediation. It heralds the possibility of resolution.

Resolution will often be followed, however, by at least some measure of disappointment, as the parties realize they were unable to achieve their previously desired goals.