Commentary 1

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Three kinds of mediator styles are mentioned in the articles of this special issue: facilitative, in which the mediator guides the parties through a series of stages helping them to understand the issues and their underlying interests and to develop and choose among possible solutions; evaluative or directive, in which the mediator critiques the parties' proposals, offers his or her own solution, and presses the parties to reach agreement; and transformative, in which the mediator mirrors and summarizes what the parties are saying and feeling, asks questions to help them sharpen their intentions, and otherwise lets them develop their own approach to the conflict. The goal of the first two styles is to develop a mutually acceptable agreement, while the third style has the goal of fostering empowerment (self-reliance) and recognition (improvement of the parties' relationship and their capacity to communicate).[1]

Defining Mediator Style

In the introduction to this issue, style is defined as "the characteristic pattern of behaviors or tactics that mediators employ." In another publication, Kressel (2006) defines style as "a cohesive set of strategies that characterize the conduct of a case" (p. 742). I am not entirely happy with either definition because they share the assumption that mediators employ a single style throughout a case. However, I like the second definition better than the first because it accords with data discussed in Charkoudian's article.

Charkoudian and her associates (Charkoudian, de Ritis, Buck & Wilson, 2009) observed 70 community mediation sessions and coded 18 mediator strategies. Data analysis revealed two main clusters within which the correlations are quite high, implying a cohesive set of strategies. The first cluster, which closely resembles the facilitative style, includes interest/value, feeling, neutral issue, bigger picture, request reaction, brainstorm, and participant control.[2] The second, which closely resembles the evaluative or directive style, contains suggestion, opinion, advocate/support, and mediator solution. This is a unique and important data set because it involves actual observation of mediator behavior, because the correlations in each set are unusually high (averaging .49 for the facilitative set and .52

[1]The facilitative style is elaborated and advocated by Moore (2003) and the transformative style by Bush and Folger (2005). The evaluative style is seldom advocated or acknowledged though it is commonly found, as shown in the articles by Charkoudian and McDermott.

[2]For definitions of these strategies, see Table 3 in Charkoudian's article. I have done a slight reanalysis of her correlation table (presented in Charkoudian et al., 2009), dropping a few of the codes listed in each set (see her Table 4, Groups 1 and 2) to minimize the number of low correlations.

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for the evaluative set)[3] and because the sets correspond to two of the three previously identified styles.

Further analysis of these data shows why I am not fully happy with either definition of style. The average correlation between the strategies in the first and the second sets is a measly -.08,[4] suggesting that the two strategies are independent rather than mutually exclusive. Indeed, a mediator who made heavy use of the facilitative style was just about as likely to use the evaluative style as one who did not. Some mediators in the sample were mainly facilitative, others mainly evaluative, and many were both—they employed more than one style. This suggests that facilitation and evaluation should be seen as independent (orthogonal) *dimensions* of mediator style rather than as styles that are characteristic of some mediators but not of others.

The best sense I can make of these data is that the two dimensions represent behaviorally oriented schemas, in the sense of structured sets of ideas about how to behave in particular situations (see Fiske, Morling, Manstead & Hewstone, 1995). A familiar example in another realm would be the car-driving schema, which is activated when an experienced driver gets behind the wheel or thinks of someone else behind the wheel. It consists of knowledge about how to start the car and turn a corner, when to stop gradually or suddenly, where to find information about routes, and so on. It can be used to organize one's own behavior or understand someone else's. This schema would be independent of, let us say, the schema for parenting a small child, which would include such elements as protecting the child from danger. When behind the wheel alone, the driving schema would be activated. When walking with one's child, the parenting schema would be activated. When driving one's child to school, both would be activated.

Under What Conditions Should Each Style Be Used?

If schemas underlie the various styles (or style dimensions), then we need to ask about the conditions that activate each style. There is not much evidence about this issue, but there is plenty of advice about the conditions under which each style should be used, some of it based on research. Thus, in a study of divorce mediation, Donohue (1989) found that agreement was most likely to be reached if the mediator said little when disputants were engaged in productive problem-solving (resembling the transformative style) and interrupted when they became hostile or began to circle. Studies of both labor and community mediation (Lim & Carnevale, 1990; Zubek, Pruitt, McGillicuddy, Peirce & Syna, 1992) suggest that in the latter condition, agreement becomes more likely if the mediator shifts to a facilitative style—exploring the interests and feelings underlying the parties' positions, sharpening the issues, challenging the parties to come up with new ideas, requesting reactions to these ideas, and the like. In addition, studies of labor mediation (Hiltrop, 1985;

[3]The correlations were averaged using Fisher's *z* transformation (see Silver & Dunlap, 1987). If we include all the strategies listed for the two styles in Charkoudian's Table 4 (Groups 1 and 2), the average correlations drop to .39 and .36.

[4]Using all of the strategies listed for the two styles in Charkoudian's Table 4, the average correlation between the two sets of strategies is only -.03.

Hiltrop, Kressel & Pruitt, 1989; Lim & Carnevale, 1990) show that when conflicts become particularly intense, a directive style—suggesting possible solutions and putting pressure on the disputants—encourages agreement, though the same style discourages agreement when conflict intensity is low.

The results just described imply that mediators should shift their style as they go along in a session. At first, they should limit themselves to encouraging joint problem-solving unless it is obvious that the conflict is too intense for this to work. The worst thing they can do is start with a directive style and critique the parties' positions or suggest solutions in ignorance of the issues. If joint problem-solving does not emerge, they should shift to a facilitative style. And if conflict is still too intense for the parties to move toward agreement, they should shift again to an evaluative style and critique the parties' positions (privately, not in joint session) or make suggestions of their own. The latter two elements of this sequence are endorsed by Moore (2003) in a popular guide to mediation.

If, as suggested above, some of Charkoudian's mediators were using both the facilitative and the directive styles, it is quite possible that they were doing so in the sequence just suggested. Her data do not contain order information, but the next study should.

The advice just given is not likely to sit well with advocates of transformative mediation, because their goal is not to reach agreement but to transform the parties and their relationship. If the parties reach agreement, that is fine; but it is immaterial to the success of mediation. My rejoinder is that these advocates are both right and wrong depending on the conditions. Under some conditions, the goals of transformative mediation make a lot of sense, but under others they do not.

In the setting where Bingham did her study—employee–supervisor conflicts in the United States Post Office—the goals of empowering the parties and transforming their relationship seem right. There you are dealing with a continuing, interdependent relationship that has gone awry—where the presenting issues are probably the tip of the iceberg and the real issue is the parties' relationship. Many conflicts are like this, but by no means all, and when they are not, the transformative method may be irrelevant or counterproductive.

The transformative style will also run into the problems when the parties want advice about how to resolve a particular problem, a not uncommon occurrence (Phillips, 2001). Even if their relationship is difficult, they may not want to spend the time needed to repair it (Pruitt, 2006b). Such parties are likely to resent and reject mediators who have an exclusive policy of relationship building. McDermott says that he encountered a number of such cases, which usually involved how much money was owed. Even a strictly facilitative style was not acceptable, as many of the parties wanted guidance on a fair settlement. In other words, they wanted a mediator who was willing to adopt an evaluative style.[5]

[5]Charkoudian tells quite the opposite story. She and the father of her child sought facilitative mediation to help them work out some parenting issues. But they were assigned a mediator who employed a heavy evaluative style, giving opinions about child rearing and suggesting inappropriate solutions. This mediator was not very helpful and was much resented. Again, the style did not fit the conditions.

Mediation is often between organizations, as in union-management and international settings. If there are relationship problems, they are likely to involve many people on both sides rather than just the negotiators. If both parties want to resolve their conflict, a facilitative, evaluative, or combined style may help them reach agreement. But the goals of transformative mediation will not be attainable through mediation.

Mediation Tactics

Today, mediators are often trained narrowly in only one style. But if mediator style should conform to conditions, mediators need a whole tool bag of tactics as suggested by McDermott. They should be able to employ a transformative, facilitative, or evaluative approach, as need arises. But the tool bag should not be limited to these three styles. Kressel (2007) has described a strategic style that is appropriate for mediators who have had much experience in a particular social milieu, for example, veteran mediators in the NIH Office of the Ombudsman, who frequently employ this style. After gathering information about a conflict, the mediator will often find that it fits a well-known template, for example, a conflict over autonomy between an excellent young scientist and his or her older supervisor. The mediator then informs the parties about his or her diagnosis and suggests a solution or solutions. Mediators in training should learn about this style along with examples of where it has been successful.

Within most styles, there are choices between *tactics*, and these should also be part of the tool bag. Thus, mediators should understand the strengths and weaknesses of caucusing (Welton, Pruitt & McGillicuddy, 1988). They should learn how to reframe issues to make them more amenable to solution (Gray, 2006). They also should learn how to handle hostility and anger. Since there is a controversy about this issue, they should study several viewpoints. For example, they could read and discuss an article by Shapiro (2006), who advocates helping the parties work through their hostility, and another by Saposnek (2006), who feels that mediators must try to stop angry interchanges.

The mediators' tactics should also contain alternative mediation *designs* and knowledge about when they should be used. If higher-ups are blocking agreement, the mediator may need to communicate with them (Colosi, 1983). If outsiders hold the key to understanding the issues or implementing the agreement, they may need to be brought into the mediation.[6] Large cultural or social differences between the parties are best handled by a mediation team (co-mediation) that has members of the same cultural or social groups as the parties. When there is great hostility or the parties are unable or unwilling to meet each other, the mediator may have to play the role of an intermediary and shuttle between them (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). If there is no intermediary who can talk with both parties, two intermediaries may be needed, one working with each side.[7] When fighting is going on

[6]Wall and Blum (1991) report that community mediation in the People's Republic of China often employs this design.

[7]The author (Pruitt, 2007) reports that this design was employed in talks that were preliminary to the Stormont negotiations that settled the Northern Ireland conflict.

between groups, mediators can sometimes arrange secret, backchannel talks between people on both sides (Pruitt, 2008; Wanis-St. John, 2011).

Furthermore, mediators should be ready to refer cases to other kinds of third parties when mediation is inappropriate. For example, when there are clear-cut rules or laws, or one party is too timid or weak to defend itself, arbitration or adjudication may be more appropriate than mediation.

I have talked about a tool bag composed of various styles and tactics that should be a part of training for new mediators. But once such a training program has been devised, it should be employed in mid-career training as well. Many mediators at work today have been narrowly trained and need the breadth that such a program would provide.

Research

We know more about the nature of mediator styles, tactics, and designs than we do about the conditions under which they should be employed. To fill that gap, much more research is needed. This research should be based on thoughtful hypotheses about the relationship between independent and dependent variables and speculation about the processes that link them. An example is the hypothesis mentioned earlier: When disputants persist in angry or circling discussions, agreement is more likely if the mediator shifts to directive tactics, but starting with directive tactics can be counterproductive.

Ideally, hypotheses should be derived from broader theories, but that may be premature for a young field like this one. A more practical starting point might be to ask sophisticated mediators for their opinions about the conditions that call for each style and tactic. Or one might start with a stylistic or tactical controversy, such as whether to stop angry exchanges or help the parties work through their anger. When there are controversies between experienced mediators, it is likely that both of them are right under certain conditions, and hypotheses about these conditions can be developed with careful thought.

Causal hypotheses are best tested with true experiments, where cases are assigned at random to different mediator styles, tactics, or designs. Laboratory experiments in simulated settings can be useful (see, for example, Pruitt & Johnson, 1970), but field experiments allow more certainty about how to generalize results (Pruitt, 2006a). An example would be a study in which my students and I randomly assigned cases from a community mediation center to three different mediation designs: two types of med-arb and a control condition (McGillicuddy, Welton & Pruitt, 1987).

Experiments are essential for investigating the usefulness of new techniques (see, for example, Conlon, Moon & Ng, 2002), but they often pose multiple problems. One is that many cases must be used to test the impact of only one or two independent variables. Another is that random assignment can disrupt the routines of a mediation service that is hosting one's study. The latter problem developed in our med-arb study, and the director of the service was unwilling to host further experiments. It would be useful if the directors of mediation services were themselves researchers or knew enough about research to understand the pros and cons of various research designs.

An alternative to randomization is to employ a quasi-experimental design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Cook & Campbell, 1979). For example, if a mediation service is switching to

a new mediation style, one can evaluate the impact of that switch by comparing outcome measurements (e.g., whether agreement is reached) made before and after the switch. In such a study, it is best to use a time-series design and make measurements several times before and after the switch. If there are only small changes between measurements before and after the switch but a big one (e.g., a lot more agreements reached) at the time of the switch, it is usually reasonable to conclude that the switch has produced this effect. That design could have been used to assess the impact of switching to the transformative style in the study reported by Bingham.

Experiments and quasi-experiments are the best research designs, but most studies must employ correlational designs, where there is no assignment to conditions, and all variables are measured. When such methods are used, causal inference is less secure,[8] but more variables can be examined, and there is less disruption than in most experiments. All three authors in this issue employed designs of that type, and we learn a lot from their studies.

Summary and Conclusions

Results from a study that involved observation of mediator behavior suggest that facilitation and evaluation are independent mediator styles, each involving strategies that are highly correlated across mediators. Some mediators use only one of these styles, and many use both. This suggests that it is better to think of dimensions of mediator style rather than of styles, the definition of dimension being a cohesive set of mediator strategies.

Other research implies that mediators should not stick to one style (or dimension of style) but should adopt different styles under different conditions. The same appears to be true for mediator tactics within each style and for the various possible designs of mediation. This implies, in turn, that mediator training and retraining should cover a large tool bag of styles and tactics and should discuss the conditions that are appropriate for use of each of them.

Knowledge about appropriate conditions is particularly weak and should be a major focus of future research. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs produce the soundest evidence about cause and effect but entail enough problems that correlational designs are likely to remain the most important approach to research in this field.

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[8]For example, suppose you find that mediators who switch to an evaluative style in the face of continued angry interchange are more successful than those who do not. Does X produce Y or Y produce X? Do the results show that this switching leads to greater success or that mediators who are successful for other reasons tend to switch in this fashion? It is often hard to choose between these interpretations.

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