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Adapting ADR across cultures

Reflections on exporting Western conflict resolution to the Solomon Islands

Morgan Brigg

Recently I was part of a team of three trainers¹ who prepared and delivered a short conflict resolution training program to Peace Monitors of the Solomon Islands National Peace Council. This followed a request for training by the Council to the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies of the University of Queensland, where I am a doctoral candidate. As part of their role in the areas to which they are posted, Peace Monitors are required to deal with a variety of conflicts, many of which are related to or inflected through what is locally termed the 'tension' that began in the late 1990s.

In the context of my research into the politics and ethics of intercultural conflict resolution, this experience generated a range of reflections that are likely to be of interest and value to others who have been or may be involved in exporting Western conflict resolution. These relate to the politico-cultural context of such training, associated ethical and political dilemmas, negotiating these difficulties, the durability of local conflict resolution processes, and the need for intercultural dialogue among conflict resolution practitioners and processes.

The 'post-colonial' context

The politico-cultural context for the training can broadly be described as post-colonial, given that the Solomon Islands has been a sovereign nation-state since 1978. However, the term post-colonial is most usefully thought to refer to a situation infused with the difficulties and legacy of colonialism rather than one in which colonialism is 'past'. One notable illustration of the ways the colonial legacy continues to play itself out is the very fact of our invitation to provide training. Solomon

Islanders themselves possess a range of conflict resolution processes and expertise and yet an overseas institution was invited to deliver training. This process of inviting accords prestige to both a Western academic institution and practices in ways that resonate with colonial precedents. In the contemporary context, this prestige is reinforced by very significant differences in wealth and resources. One result is that the other trainers and I are invariably invested with the status of conflict resolution 'expert',² raising certain ethical and political dilemmas that I discuss below.

This is not to say categorically that a colonial logic pervades such encounters, that something new and of value cannot be contributed from outside, or that the capacity to provide training in the style desired by the Council was not well served by the University of Queensland. Furthermore, while problem-solving or interest based conflict resolution has limitations, including the effecting of operations of power biased against non-Western cultures,³ it has also proven popular and of value in a range of contexts. Hence, it is precisely the complex mix of colonial legacy and contemporary possibility that presents ethical and political challenges that need to be engaged.

Ethical and political dilemmas

Increased awareness about the colonial and post-colonial politics of knowledge has led many of us to question the ethics of our professional and personal practices. Common tensions and personal wrangling relate to questions such as, 'How appropriate are the processes, skills and knowledge that I carry?' or, 'What of the processes, skills and knowledge of Solomon Islanders?' and 'Many 'white experts'

have both offended local people and failed in the past, so how can I do something different?' These cannot be dismissed as overly sensitive concerns because in my recent Solomon Islands and other intercultural training encounters, both indirect and direct questions were raised by local people – often politely – of trainers. These tended broadly to take the form of comments or questions such as 'What can these outsiders teach or show us?' or 'How relevant is your knowledge?'

A somewhat obvious solution to this difficulty appears to present itself through John Paul Lederach's ideas of elicitive rather than prescriptive practice.⁴ However, caution is required here because structural factors – for instance, our status as 'experts' and the differential between what we and trainees are paid to participate – raise the expectation that *we will* share expertise. This is, after all, what experts are paid for. Furthermore, pursuing a strongly elicitive approach in the context of different institutional standing (western university/local practitioner) and previous asymmetrical relationships between local people and white researchers can give rise to justifiable ill feeling and well-founded accusations about the appropriation of indigenous knowledge.

These dilemmas converge with yet further difficulties in the requirements for the program and logistics surrounding the training. On one hand the complicated context and dilemmas outlined thus far suggest the need for developing a working relationship or partnership with local organisations and people, and an open and flexible program. Our team knowledge of the emphasis upon relationship rather than instrumental time in the Solomon Islands, and the

predominance of oral modes of communication, confirmed this. On the other hand though, funding agencies are hesitant or unwilling, and perhaps simply unable, to fund relationship building activities. They also tend to require a program and training manual in documented form. In addition, the time frames in both the lead-up to the training and for delivery itself were, and often are, short.

Finally, the question of language requires mention. English is the official language in the Solomon Islands and tends to be widely understood. However, Solomon Islanders typically use local Indigenous languages when in their home (rural) or village areas, and Solomon Islands Pijin (a blend of English and some local words with Melanesian pronunciation and grammar) to communicate among groups, and to communicate in more urban areas. Local understanding of English presented us with less striking challenges than in some intercultural encounters, yet it did nevertheless require careful consideration and negotiation.

Negotiating the exporting dilemmas

Any training role in a culture other than one's own requires some level of knowledge of the country, culture and background issues as a baseline. Although some of this can be sourced from literature, this is rarely an adequate substitute for contact with people of the culture concerned, spending time in the culture, or some form of briefing and preparation by insiders or experienced outsiders. These requirements were met among the members of our team. The next step was developing the program.

Program documentation and preparation

A significant challenge involved meeting the requirement for a documented program and training manual while remaining sensitive to the Solomon Islands context and the politics of prescriptive versus elicitive modes of operating. To do so the team developed materials

- in straightforward English, relatively free of jargon;
- that would readily translate into an oral form including Solomon Islands Pijin;

- to support an interactive and 'hands-on' program;
- as a series of questions rather than prescriptions.

The last point was particularly important and usually involved putting a lead question followed by a series of sub-questions. For instance, one lead question relating to the early stages of the intervention process was, 'What are the most important things for each of the people [involved in the conflict]?' Such questions were followed by sub-questions such as 'What are they asking for or demanding?' 'What do they really care about?' and 'What sorts of processes are important and valuable to them?' This questioning invariably carries a level of cultural bias and gains its trajectory from Western problem-solving negotiation. However, this style of presentation allowed trainers both to contribute their own answers from experience working in Western and intercultural contexts and to operate in a flexible way that did not exclude a variety of non-Western or local processes. In other words, this provided one way of negotiating the elicitive versus prescriptive divide and the tension between being placed as an 'expert' and requirement to respect local knowledge and culture.

This same tension also required negotiation and preparation at the personal level. On one hand there is a need to be confident and assured in one's skills yet, on the other, unmitigated self-assurance can obviate the possibilities for practising receptivity to and respect for cultural difference. Interestingly, one symptom of culture shock is withdrawal from the host culture, retreat to one's own culture and, in severe cases, derogation of the host culture. In sum, there is a need to prepare oneself to be, somewhat paradoxically, confident yet susceptible. I choose the notion of susceptibility deliberately because many possibilities for learning and knowing intercultural emerge affectively rather than cognitively.⁵ Many intercultural learning possibilities are, in other words, about intuiting a 'feel' for what is happening, what is working or not working, and so on. Cultivating a susceptible attitude also allows further development of knowledge and learning about the host

culture begun prior to arrival. In this particular situation, one concrete way in which I attempted to cultivate susceptibility was to challenge myself to speaking predominantly in, and thereby further develop, my rudimentary Solomon Islands Pijin language skills.

Showtime: making it fly

Delivering an untried program outside of one's own culture and in a language in which one is not fully fluent was both challenging and rewarding. The experience confirmed, for me, the value of:

- drawing upon people's real life experiences and concerns as a basis to guide training and for material to develop activities and exercises
- working with the embedded skills and knowledge of local people
- preparedness to go outside one's comfort zone and connect with people by acknowledging one's shortcomings and misunderstandings, especially due to the change in context. (I found that speaking Solomon Islands Pijin and use of humour helpful in this respect.)
- interactive and skills-based training methods including the use of roleplay
- an ability to be flexible and to modify a program as required.

Our program preparation and operating through these broad principles facilitated an enjoyable, engaging and productive exchange with participants including joint reflection and learning about difficult situations, aspects of processes and so on. Indications from both formal and informal feedback were broadly positive, and contrasted with early scepticism. However, this is not to say that broadly difficult issues did not arise.

Imported and local methods: the durability of the local

The most significant pressure point to emerge in the training related to the interaction of Western problem-solving negotiation with the widely practised Solomon Islands process of paying compensation (giving of a restorative gift/s or sum of money) to manage or resolve conflict. Although widespread, this practice is neither universal among Solomon Island cultures nor exclusive to the Solomons – it occurs throughout Melanesia. In many cases the practice,



typically administered by Chiefs, successfully breaks a cycle of conflict, reconfigures relationships, and reconstructs social cohesion. However, in the recent period of escalated conflict wherein 'outlaw' individuals routinely broke social norms and had access to high-powered weapons, and in which political corruption made large sums of money more freely available, long-standing compensation conventions have in many respects become overwhelmed, thereby undermining the effectiveness of the practice. This has occurred through overly inflated compensation claims (often leveraged through force) incommensurate with people's capacity to pay. False, inappropriate and tenuous claims and increasing monetisation of the system had similar effects.⁶

Over the course of the training program it became apparent that the compensation method remained popular with participants regardless of the difficulties faced with it and their enthusiasm for our material. It would be naïve to think, of course, that external models might be rapidly adopted. And, in any case, problem-solving conflict resolution does not provide a ready solution to the domination practices stemming from the use, for instance, of high-powered weapons. However, at times I advocated, sometimes strongly, that it *did* provide the opportunity to address underlying concerns and interests in the way the practice of compensation did not. Some dialogue occurred on the topic and raised the value of blending Western and Solomon Islands processes, but this was limited by time constraints.

Without being able to take such a dialogue further, a series of issues and questions emerge. These include:

- What dynamic between Western problem-solving and Solomon Islands conflict resolution practices has resulted from our training for Peace Monitors?
- How can Solomon Islands and Western conflict resolution processes be blended to produce effective processes for current Solomon Islands circumstances?
- What other less immediately apparent Solomon Islands traditions and practices might be usefully drawn upon in such a process?

- Problem-solving conflict resolution notions such as 'underlying interests' rely upon a version of selfhood that tends to be specific to Western cultures.⁷ What impact might this and other cultural differences have in the intersection of Western and Solomon Islands processes?

There are no doubt many other similar questions and issues that would arise if a dialogue were to take place about the intersection of Western and local Solomon Islands conflict resolution processes. Addressing these and related intercultural issues is particularly important in the context of Australia's recent shift in foreign policy toward the Solomon Islands and the deployment of an intervention force. However, this requires creating the circumstances and opportunity for such a conversation.

Conclusion: the need for intercultural dialogue

The most striking feature of the above and related questions and issues is that they can only be addressed through a process of joint dialogue and knowledge production. This returns me to the political and ethical context and dilemmas with which I opened, and to an opportunity to move beyond colonial dynamics. The circumstances for the provision of delivery of this training allowed (only) a partial wrestling with the legacy of colonialism. In turn though, the training has opened a relationship and opportunity to address further these issues and potentially to develop, through dialogue, appropriate and effective conflict resolution practices to assist in dealing with conflicts in the contemporary Solomon Islands setting.

Such a dialogue can further ameliorate the 'expert' status of the Westerner through the development of joint intercultural learning. This path is likely to be difficult as it raises, among other issues, the relative financial standing of Western and Solomon Islander participants and the question of intellectual property. Any dialogue, then, will take time and require the gradual and committed building of relationships. Ideally, perhaps, this is how my recent intercultural training experience with Solomon Islands Peace Monitors would have begun. My experience shows, though, that engaging post-colonial

political and ethical contexts presents limitations, challenges and possibilities for their eclipse. ●

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Endnotes

1. The other members of the team were Christine Mason and Leo White. Greg Young also provided cultural and logistical advice. Although the opinions in this paper are mine, my reflections are inflected through our joint interactions and therefore contributed to by Christine, Leo and Greg. I want to thank them for sharing their thoughts, experience and insights with me during our joint work.
2. Similar note is made of this in Honeyman, C and S I Cheldelin 2002 'Have Gavel, Will Travel: Dispute Resolution's Innocents Abroad.' *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 19(3), 363-72.
3. See Brigg, M, 2003 'Mediation, Power, and Cultural Difference.' *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 20(3), 287-306.
4. See especially Ch 6 of Lederach, J P, 1995 *Preparing for peace: conflict transformation across cultures*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
5. Alphonso Lingis writes evocatively about face to face intercultural encounters emphasising the affective and a range of other faculties. See Lingis, A, 1994 *The community of those who have nothing in common*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; Lingis, A, 1995 *Abuses*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Lingis, A, 2000 *Dangerous Emotions*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
6. See Howley, P, 2002 *Breaking spears and mending hearts: peacemakers and restorative justice in Bougainville*. Annandale, NSW: Federation Press, pp 125-9 for a discussion of these issues in the Bougainvillian context.
7. See Brigg, M, 2003 'Mediation, Power, and Cultural Difference.' *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 20(3), 287-306, especially pp 295-7.