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Developing ways of knowing in ADR

Conflict resolution beyond the rationality myth

Kevin Hearn

Conflict resolution literature since the late 1990s has seen a 'surge of interest' in how to work more effectively with emotion.[1] Traditionally, conflict resolution has been thought of as a process where the emphasis is on the rational analysis of issues. Emotion, while needing to be acknowledged and explored to a degree, is seen as something which could possibly derail the process by compromising an individual's ability to engage with rational-analytic processes.[2]

Such an approach to emotion in conflict resolution is based on a myth – the myth of rationality.[3] This myth elevates rational-analytic knowing and marginalises other ways of knowing, including emotional knowing and somatic knowing. The claim is sometimes made that mediator training does not engage sufficiently with emotion.[4] Probably, few mediators would disagree. However, in this debate, 'emotion' is possibly continuing to be rationalised and subsumed within the rationality myth. The opportunity for a more creative or innovative approach to conflict resolution may be slipping away.

There seems to be a lack of awareness of how pervasive the rationality myth is. Without an adequate understanding of myth, and of the rationality myth in particular, attempts to work more effectively with emotion during mediations may not yield the hoped-for results. The main aim of this article is to highlight some possible challenges in developing a theoretical framework to support research and practice in this area.

Exploring a conflict perspective

Like many terms in the social sciences, 'conflict' has a variety of definitions and there is no consensus on a common definition.[5] Conflict is understood here as having three primary components: an emotional or affective component; a bodily or somatic component; and a rational-analytic or cognitive component. These components are referred to as 'ways of knowing' which are interconnecting and interrelating to acknowledge some degree of threat to the integrity of the individual.

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The line of argument being followed is that conflict:

- is an emotional, somatic and rational-analytic experience
- involves acknowledgement of a degree of threat to the integrity of one or more parties producing a sense of dis-ease
- is an inner phenomenon which is experienced within the self through internal dialogue which may involve interpersonal dialogue with one or more other parties, the relationship(s) with such party or parties being located, primarily, in the past, present or future
- is elusive in that it avoids an absolute or complete knowing.

These three primary components of conflict are referred to as ways of 'knowing'. Because of what Berman[6] calls Western academic understanding, 'knowing' has tended to be understood as rational-analytic knowing. Such a perspective has marginalised other ways of knowing, including emotional knowing and somatic knowing.

What is being called rational-analytic or cognitive knowing (which, for example, this article seeks to engage with) is taken to mean a way of knowing that uses, primarily, language, especially the language of concepts. It uses assumptions and seeks a 'logical' explanation through analysis, employing such devices as definitions, hierarchies, dualisms and various kinds of linear and quantifying processes. It may be described as a joining-the-dots way of knowing; a sorting and naming process.

Emotional knowing is a way of knowing which occurs when we feel angry or excited, sad or happy, bored or guilty, in despair or elated, and so on. During such experiences, I am in touch with reality. Emotional knowing, in response to music, may be seen as providing the initial breakthrough in Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Styron's recovery from depression. 'This sound, which like all music – indeed, like all pleasure – I had been numbly unresponsive to for months, pierced my heart like a dagger, and in a flood of swift recollection I thought of all the joy the house had known'.[7] In grieving for a deceased relative or friend, I may come to know, through emotional knowing, just as I may come to know, through rational-analytical

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knowing, by completing a thesis on the process of grieving.

There is also bodily or somatic knowing. The poet, Robert Bly, once admitted that he did not 'know' what the concluding line of one of his poems 'meant' but he 'knew' the line belonged there because as he wrote it, he felt a twinge in his gut.[8] Through this way of knowing, I may come to know by surrendering to my breathing during meditation just as I may come to knowing by listening to a lecture on body language.

Another way of knowing may be called intuitive or epiphanic knowing. The mathematician, Carl Gaus, is supposed to have said on a certain occasion: 'The solution I already know; what now remains is to find the way by which I arrived at it'.[9] To 'find the way', Gaus would possibly have drawn largely on rational-analytic knowing. I may spend the day puzzling over a problem; at 2.30am the next morning I wake up, still not 'knowing' what to do. Suddenly, a possible solution emerges, something which never figured in my puzzling.

Berman[10] argues that in Europe, from about the mid-16th century onwards, ways of knowing other than rational –analytical knowing could not be intellectually refuted, because they still felt 'real'. However they were intellectually rejected as 'unreliable'. There was an eventual loss of confidence in such ways of knowing. The world view called modernity was emerging.

Four assumptions are made in regard to the above:

(1) there is not an exhaustive list of ways of knowing
(2) one way of knowing can take us only so far
(3) one way of knowing may take on a compulsive quality, in which case other ways of knowing are marginalised
(4) rational-analytic knowing took on a compulsivity (identified as the rationality myth) as part of the world view or paradigm of modernity.

Myth as compulsive knowing

The first assumption underpinning the following brief explication of myth is that we never apprehend reality in some kind of absolute or complete way. We can speak only of ways of being in touch with reality, or of ways of knowing. Reality is understood as involving 'mysteriousness' in the sense used by Boff.[11]

> Mystery is not an enigma which, once solved, disappears. Mystery is a dimension of depth to be found in every person, in every creature and in reality as a whole; it has a necessary unfathomable, that is, inexplicable aspect.

Boff goes on to clarify the nature of mystery by saying that it is not something to be opposed to knowing. It is part of the nature of mystery that it should continue to be mysterious, even when known. That is, we continue to know reality, not exhaustively until there is no more to be known, but with the confidence that there is more to be known, that this more can be known better, and be known to the point of infinity. Berman[12] also supports an interpretation of reality involving a 'larger process' operating in a way that we cannot directly apprehend through rational-analytical knowing ; what might be called 'mystery'. He adds that the question Einstein asked – Is the universe friendly? – remains the crucial one. Applied to the context here, the question becomes: Is mystery friendly?

The second assumption is that 'too much' mystery leads to the transformation of reality from something that may be attractive, or 'friendly' into adversity, which may not be liveable because it does not make sense. A third assumption is that to be human is to be unable to accept that our life is ruled, ultimately, by 'senseless adversity; or, as Thornhill[13] says, by, 'chaos and meaninglessness'. If the 'waiting' to make sense of (that is, to know) a 'senseless' situation cannot be sustained then the choice may be between things falling apart, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, engaging (compulsively) in a particular way of knowing.

If such an experience is sufficiently widespread among individuals in a particular historical group, a myth may emerge. A myth may become so

widespread and be so deeply held that it becomes the primary shaper and controller of the beliefs and behaviours of this group. Thornhill[14] suggests that a myth survives because it establishes its own system of proof so that the myth itself is beyond proof or disproof within that system and it persists according to the degree of human fulfilment it brings to the particular historical group.

So myth is understood not as a fairy story, nor as a philosophy; and myth is beyond straight history.[15] It is understood as a lived reality involving an over-identification with a particular way of knowing; a compulsivity resulting in a kind of fundamentalism which sees the empowerment of other ways of knowing as threat.

The rationality myth

The rationality myth is understood as part of the world view or paradigm of modernity which is referred to by Tarnas[16] as the 'complex evolution' of the Western way of knowing from the Medieval-Christian world view to the Modern Secular world view. Rational-analytic knowing evolved long before this particular 'complex evolution'. Perhaps it was gaining some prominence over emotional and somatic knowing when we learned to speak about 100,000 years ago,[17] and it appears to have developed significantly among the ancient Greeks 2600 years ago. What is being suggested here is that rational-analytic knowing assumed mythic status as part of the 'complex evolution' referred to above.

Thornhill[18] argues that modernity's essential concern was an affirmation of the autonomy of the secular order. Religion and politics were intertwined during the early stages of this 'complex evolution'. The Christian world view underpinned much day-to-day thinking, as well as the more esoteric thinking which underpinned the justification of politico-religious oppression. Thus, the modern person strives for freedom from any sort of religious or political oppression, for autonomy of thought and action.

Marginalising emotional and somatic knowing

An assumption made now is that such striving led to an over-identification with individual freedom resulting in what might be called 'chronic individualism', whereby people lost much of their awareness of relatedness. This facilitated the emergence of the rationality myth whose key premise is the claim of objective knowledge or knowing. This is the claim that I can 'stand apart' from what I observe in the sense that the observed does not reflect to the observer a 'real' (rational-analytical) sense of relatedness or connectedness.

Various attempts have been made (perhaps the first notable attempt being that of Kant in the 18th century) to challenge this claim, but by engaging only with rational-analytic knowing. The assumption here is that relatedness operates emotionally and somatically as well as cognitively. Because emotional and somatic knowing were marginalised by the rationality myth, these attempts have been forced to leave certain cards in the deck.

Identity as individual identity

This desensitising of the modern person's sense of relatedness has given rise to a notion of self whose identity is understood, primarily, as individual identity which is privileged over the self of relatedness. Such an identity requires a cultural milieu which prioritises the ongoing affirmation of the individual self; for example, through the ongoing individual consumption of different symbols, brands, body images, lifestyles, beliefs, knowledge and so on. If the rationality myth in the 17th century was summed up by Descartes' one liner: 'I think, therefore I am', perhaps it could be summed up today by: 'I consume, therefore I am'.[19]

A way of not-being-in-the-world

A concluding assumption is that the rationality myth has enabled rational-analytic knowing to be the main driver as regards seeking to be in touch with reality, including that part of reality called 'conflict'. Simultaneously, this knowing, operating compulsively, has been the main limiting factor in this quest. Hirigoyen[20] asserts that we are not isolated entities, that we exist within a system of connections. However, the rationality myth has 'cerebralised' these connections to the extent that emotional and somatic connections are not 'trusted' unless they can be verified by rational-analytic knowing. Hence, the rationality myth may be seen, in a sense, as a way of not-being-in-the-world.

Heidegger[21] defines the human person as not simply 'being' (understood as a noun or verb), but as Dasein: 'being there', being-in-the-world. We develop our 'being' by continuously discovering what is 'there', internally and externally. By learning better how to know, emotionally and somatically, we are discovering more of what is 'there'. We are being-in-the-world in a way that is not possible when living within the compulsivity of rational-analytic knowing.

If the rationality myth in the 17th century was summed up by Descartes' one liner: 'I think, therefore I am', perhaps it could be summed up today by: 'I consume, therefore I am'.

To influence someone in any serious way (for example, in conflict resolution) is to have an impact on that person somatically, emotionally and cognitively. Berman[22] points out that although we have methodologies of analysis based on rational-analytical knowing we do not have methodologies of feeling based on somatic and emotional knowing. To devise methodologies involving a collaborative way of knowing would seem to demand of researchers not only cognitive labour, but also emotional and somatic labour.

The research context

Appadurai[23] argues for the need to find a new way of envisioning research collaboration. He is speaking of 'collaboration' in the context of internationalising social science research between academics of the privileged institutions of the West (and the North) and those who speak for the poor, the vulnerable, the dispossessed and the marginalised. This article seeks to adopt a similar approach in that it argues there is a need to find a new way of envisioning research into the collaborative interaction of the 'privileged' cognitive or rational-analytic way of knowing and the 'marginalised' 'other' ways of knowing.

Just as the more marginal areas of the world are not simply producers of data for the 'theory mills' of the North[24] so it may also be argued that the marginalised ways of knowing are not simply producers of data for the 'theory mill' of rationally-analytic knowing. A further argument is that regions of the world are not facts but artefacts of our interests and our fantasies.[25] Likewise, knowing is less fact and more artefact. A challenge for researchers is that this 'artefact' (knowing) is fashioned within the cultural presumptions of the rationality myth which underpins what is called 'research' in the West.

Beresford[26] highlights similar opportunities/challenges when he discusses the recent involvement of disabled people's movements, mental health users/survivors and other service users in social work theory-building and research. He describes it as one of the most important developments in modern social theory. The assumption concluding this section is that conflict resolution theory would benefit from engaging with the collaboration stream within current social theory. This would be conducted at the intra-personal level (as well as the inter-personal level) in terms of ways of knowing.

Research into the collaborative interaction of various ways of knowing would involve being open to marginalised ways of knowing. Hence the caution given above that such research would demand emotional and somatic labour as well as cognitive labour. However, the need to press ahead with 'new' research into conflict resolution would seem to be sufficiently urgent (for example, in the area of 'sticky' conflict residues) to justify such labour.

Dealing with 'sticky' conflict residues

Resolution of conflict is being understood as involving a collaboration of various ways of knowing. Ideally, no way of knowing is marginalised and their interaction continues until the sense of threat or dis-ease subsides. Such may be the ideal. It may be more reasonable to assume that, while some conflict is resolved, some is simply managed.

When conflict is managed rather than resolved, there may be left behind what Keashly and Nowell[27] call 'sticky' conflict residues, or degrees of residual or unresolved threat or dis-ease. The work of Grof suggests that the process of biological birth lays down a foundational 'sticky' conflict residue.[28] This experience possibly lays down a knowing of conflict that is much more emotional and somatic than cognitive. Maintaining the myth of rationality may be seen as continuing with a limited awareness of conflict, an awareness which is largely cut off from primordial awareness.

If circumstances of conflict between birth and death are experienced profoundly by a person, 'sticky' conflict residues may contribute to a restructuring of personality. While it is possible that a person may emerge from such experiences stronger and wiser, it is also possible that an

individual will suffer severe ongoing somatic, cognitive and emotional disease. There is also the possibility of the emergence of a 'perverse abuser'[29] whose life strategies include inflicting severe damage to other human beings through the displacement of the disease to a targeted party. Adding to the complexity of the latter possibility, as far as mediators are concerned, is that the most consistent feature of such abusers, in both the testimony of targeted parties and the observations of psychologists, is their apparent normality.[30] One could add, 'normality' within the constraints of compulsive rational-analytic knowing.

Does the current surge of interest in how to work with emotion in conflict resolution processes provide hope for more effective interventions in such challenging circumstances? Some circumstances of workplace harassment (or bullying or emotional abuse) may provide such a challenge. Sheehan and Jordan[31] recommend skilling of workplace members in emotional competencies to ameliorate the prevalence and severity of such abuse. This recommendation seems to be predicated partly on the principles of emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence has been defined as 'the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships'.[32] Emotional intelligence has also been described as the commodification of emotion; that is, transforming emotion into a marketable product.[33] It may also be understood as 'the tip of the iceberg', alerting us to the need to move away from the ongoing process of engaging with emotion in a marginalising way as it continues to be subsumed within the rationality myth. The capacity of emotional intelligence, as it seems to be presently understood, to problematise the 'normality' of perverse 'knowers', as outlined above, would seem to be questionable. Until we become more confident with emotional literacy and body literacy (as we already are with words) perhaps little progress will be achieved in managing conflict involving workplace bullying or harassment.

Enhancing mindfulness through collaborative knowing

Mediation is understood, in part, as 'being present' to parties in dispute or in conflict; being present in a way that has the purpose of facilitating discussion between the parties, assisting them to isolate the issues in dispute, to develop options for their resolution and to reach an agreement that accommodates the interests and needs of all parties.[34] Mediator presence would seem to be an area of practice which relates closely to some of the issues raised in this article.

According to Fisher,[35] a necessary feature of such presence is 'mindfulness', described as the capacity for one to notice, without comparing and judging, whatever passes through one's awareness – bodily sensations, emotions, sounds and thoughts. Nouwen, McNeil and Morrison[36] suggest we have lost awareness of such a kind of presence because we have come to believe that presence must be useful (in terms of rational-analytical knowing). Useful, compared with what?

This focus on 'usefulness' may be seen as driven by the notion of self outlined earlier where self has an identity understood primarily as individual identity. Such a 'separate' self needs ongoing affirmation of its existence. Affirmation is achieved by continuously comparing ourselves with others to identify similarities and differences – including similarities and differences in regard to 'usefulness'.

Conclusion

The compulsivity of the rationality myth involves an over-identification with rational-analytic knowing and the marginalising of other ways of knowing. Claims that, as mediators, we are doing conflict resolution differently by incorporating principles of emotional intelligence, may turn out to mean that we are simply doing rational-analytic knowing about emotion differently. Emotion may continue to be marginalised by being rationalised and subsumed within the rationality myth. Whether current work with emotional intelligence represents such a process seems, at this stage, problematic.

The rationality myth is part of the complex evolution of the Western way of knowing from the Medieval-Christians world view to the Modern Secular world view. Modernity's essential concern was an affirmation of the legitimate autonomy of the secular order. However, striving for autonomy of thought and action resulted in a way of not-being-in-the-world, emotionally and somatically. The outcome has been a decrease in the awareness of relatedness at the inter-personal and intra-personal levels. Among other things, this limits the chances of understanding, managing and resolving conflict.

The rationality myth emerged in Europe at the time because its way of knowing was superior. It seems reasonable, in terms of rational-analytic knowing, to claim that the rationality myth may be evolving to enable the emergence of a way of knowing that is even more superior. Individuals may risk leaving behind the 'old' myth

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because a 'new' myth is known, emotionally and somatically and, perhaps, epiphanically, to offer so much more. Perhaps we are moving from a Eurocentric or Western rationality towards a global rationality which knows that boundaries of various kinds, not only those between ways of knowing, are characterised more by porosity and less by rigidity. ●

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