'THE VALUE OF NEUTRALITY'

AN ARTICLE BY

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Section 1 – Neutrality and Cultural Neutrality

Section 2 – Recognising Cultural Neutrality and its Value

Conclusion

Introduction

The concept of 'neutrality' in relation to third-party intervention in conflict-resolution has been critically examined by theorists and practitioners alike[1] - probably since the very inception of the term. There are also cultural reasons behind the questioning of the role of neutrality, as I will point out below.

The purpose of this paper is threefold:

- firstly, to re-frame the discussion about neutrality by placing it in a wider, multicultural context;
- secondly, to argue that neutrality harbours significant potential value in material, social and environmental terms at micro- and macro-levels;
- thirdly, to address what hinders neutrality from being sought, recognised and developed in practice.

Obviously, it only makes sense to present a case for the value of neutrality if there is a common understanding of the concept itself and also if it is proven that neutrality can indeed be attained in practice. I will address both of these issues in the first part of the paper.

I would like to point out from the beginning that I will be drawing a strong distinction between 'neutrality' and 'cultural neutrality', and consequently between 'mediation' and 'intercultural conflict conciliation'.

For ease of understanding, it is recommended that the reader has an acquaintance with the concept of 'deep-culture'. [2]

Section 1 – Neutrality and Cultural Neutrality

In this section of the paper, I will be addressing three central questions:

1. Why is neutrality so challenging?
2. How does 'cultural neutrality' differ from 'neutrality'?
3. What does 'intercultural conflict conciliation' entail?

In addressing these questions, I lay the foundations for an appreciation of the value of neutrality.

1.1 Neutrality and intervention

The reader will probably be able to think of numerous examples of neutral third-party intervention in conflicts in private and public life.

The reader may also like to reflect on when such intervention seems to be productive, and when not.

1.1.1 Unsolicited intervention in private life and business

I remember, as an adolescent, trying to intervene as a man was beating his wife at a bus-stop in England, and later, as a university student, trying to dissuade a group of youths from dismantling garden gates and throwing them into the street as their owners looked on in petrified horror; on both occasions, I ended up a further victim of the aggression.

In more recent years, I witnessed how two zealous, newly-enrolled members of a mediation association in Switzerland, who had offered their unsolicited services in writing to the parties of a well-publicised business conflict, received a concisely worded reply instructing them to 'mind their own business'.

In each of these cases, the intervention was not only unsolicited by the parties involved, but it also carried an inherent non-neutral message, i.e. that the behaviour of the actors was not good.

1.1.2 Self-serving intervention

History books and contemporary national newspapers are full of examples of apparently well-meant, but nevertheless fruitless third-party initiatives in the international political arena. Such initiatives typically involve intervention between fighting factions, between aggressors and victims, between ruling majorities and persecuted minorities etc.

In numerous cases, the motives for such intervention are interpreted to be primarily self-serving, e.g. to secure oil or water supply, rather than being altruistic.[3] When the motives are perceived as such, the intervention tends not only to exacerbate the local conflict, but can also

create tensions for many generations to come between the locals and the intervening outsiders.

1.1.3 Gender-trapped intervention

In cases of attempts to resolve marital conflict, it is not uncommon for male or female mediators to be deemed biased towards the party of the same gender, thus torpedoing the out-of-court resolution process.

One mediator I knew of had undergone a sex-change and, visibly displaying both male and female characteristics in appearance and behaviour, offered mediation services to couples in conflict. The mediator in question embodied an opportunity to circumnavigate the 'gender-trap' quandary and thus to be accepted by both male and female parties.

Male and female managers, human resource staff, ombudspersons and others also frequently experience acceptance or rejection because they are felt to be naturally biased to those of their own gender.

There are, of course, many examples where the gender of the mediator does not have a negative impact on the mediation process.

1.1.4. Skin-colour-trapped intervention

I am also aware of situations where the skin-colour and/or ethnicity of proposed third-party conciliators has created a perception of such 'undisputable bias' - even prior to the resolution process - that they have been disqualified without room for discussion.

Visible indicators of ethnicity in the multicultural workplace can create insurmountable challenges for managers whose function requires them to be seen as being racially impartial.

Again, there are many counter-examples.

1.1.5 Language-trapped intervention

Another physical barrier which faces conflict-parties and conciliators alike is, of course, the language factor.

Intercultural conflicts often occur between the speakers of different languages and, if the conciliator is ostensibly more fluent in one language rather than the other, he/she will readily be perceived as being biased towards the party of the same language.

Interestingly, the conciliator might, if given the chance to conciliate:

- subconsciously give more listening attention to the party of the other language, simply because he/she is less fluent in it;
- consciously compensate in some way for the language disparity.

On the other hand, the conciliator might:

- subconsciously make false assumptions in relation to the party whose language he/she speaks more fluently.

Since none of these patterns are productive for conciliation processes, the language factor presents a major challenge which needs to be addressed and overcome, just as gender and skin-colour factors do.

1.1.6 Hierarchical and power-based intervention

In very many school-systems around the world, teachers are expected to exercise their authority and intervene in fights between pupils.

Fathers or mothers will exercise parental power, in various manifestations, to intervene between their children.

Depending on their company culture, managers will also be expected to stop conflicts between their employees.

Sometimes, such interventions 'from above' are accepted and effective; at other times, not.

1.1.7 Institutionalised intervention

The United Nations Organisation has sent many thousands of its blue-helmet troops to intervene in racial conflict, sometimes with success, and sometimes without. Many times, this intervention is judged as ineffective due to a wide variety of factors including, notably,

perceived non-neutrality. Nevertheless, the peace-restoring endeavours of the U.N.O. are welcomed and supported by very many people in the world, including the organisation's own staff.

The foreign policy of the United States of America, most particularly during the administration of George W. Bush, has been rejected by many non-USA bodies and individuals on the grounds that the U.S.A has been trying to act as the 'world's policeman', i.e. has been acting non-neutrally. Very many US and other world citizens, however, continue to regard that same foreign policy as an obligation in the furtherance of democracy.

In many countries, the police are called to intervene in household conflicts by neighbours who regard it as their duty to act upon such matters, even if most of them prefer to remain anonymous when doing so. The police will respond to these calls and are legitimated to intervene under local laws relating to 'disturbance of the peace'. The quarrelling parties often regard the intervention as an unjustified intrusion.

1.1.8 Conclusion

There are two issues at-hand in these examples. One concerns 'neutrality' itself and the other concerns the acceptance, solicitation and/or legitimacy of third-party intervention.

Apparently, people around the world perceive there to be:

- cases where there is a need for a neutral third-party, if solicited;
- cases where it is appropriate to have neutral third-party intervention, whether solicited or not;
- cases where there is a need for non-neutral third-party intervention, if solicited;
- cases where it is appropriate to have non-neutral third-party intervention, whether solicited or not;
- cases where there is no need for any type of third-party involvement, whether neutral or non-neutral and whether solicited or unsolicited.

By examining the issues of solicitation and legitimacy of third-party involvement, I will try to delineate what 'neutrality' necessarily entails.

1.2 Neutrality and cultural neutrality

1.2.1 Neutrality, apathy, intrusion and cultural relativism

> Under what circumstances do humans have the right and/or obligation to intervene in the affairs of other human beings?

There are many differing answers to this question and I will start to address them from the perspective that the answers are conditioned, at least in part, by the cultural backgrounds of the respondents. Even the raising of the question appears to me to be a cultural phenomenon, in the sense that there are cultures which would not automatically generate such a question, let alone try to address its underlying premises in the form of a response.

Terms like 'right' and 'obligation', as commonly understood in English usage, mirror the strong masculinity[4] and universalism[5] of Anglo-Saxon cultures. The latter, like certain Germanic cultures, generally prefer an active or 'proactive' and assertive attitude, which is reflected also in a prevailing need to intervene. They tend to regard non-intervention as 'apathy' and attach a negative connotation to terms like 'cultural relativism'. Consequently, mediation is now prescribed by many legal systems as an initial step in juridical proceedings, whether the parties voluntarily request it or not.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find a wealth of Anglo-Saxon literature and teaching[6] which argues for a non-passive role on the part of the mediator and which sometimes goes as far as to reject the need for neutrality. The findings of related Western research into the mediator's actual behaviour serve to underscore the claim that the mediator is not neutral and, in order to be effective, he/she need not be so. Kevin Avruch in his book '*Culture and Conflict Resolution*' discusses the empowerment approach where:

'confrontation can be used to redress imbalances'.[7]

In the USA, there are numerous retired judges whom people in conflict are glad to have as their mediator, i.e. an authority with a lifetime of experience in actively ruling on cases involving civil and penal justice.

Whilst teaching intercultural conciliation at the University of Lucerne in Switzerland, I found that the majority of the students (mature students from various disciplines) had great difficulty in relativising their preconception that mediation should be practised proactively and that 'apathy' and 'cultural relativism' were to be shunned. I have had similar experiences with managers, lawyers and people from various walks of life: these were all people who had internalised a more masculine understanding of the concept of mediative intervention.

In more general terms, the 'leader' and the 'manager' in today's corporate world are expected to have well-informed and strong opinions which they should push through, even against initial firm resistance, providing they prove later to have been right. A manager with no firm opinion about what is right and what is wrong, a manager without a proactive attitude is, in today's corporate world, not a 'manager'. Contemporary mainstream thinking holds that the manager cannot simultaneously be a neutral mediator - an assumption which I think deserves questioning.

On the subject of 'ethnocentrism' and 'cultural relativism', C.P. Kottak writes in his book *'Mirror for Humanity'*[8]:

> One of anthropology's main goals is to combat ethnocentrism … (C)ultural relativism … can also present problems. At its most extreme, cultural relativism argues that there is no superior, international, or universal morality, that the moral and ethical rules of all cultures deserve equal respect. In the extreme, Nazi Germany is evaluated as nonjudgmentally as Athenian Greece.

Kottak continues:

> However, objectivity, sensitivity and a cross-cultural perspective don't mean that anthropologists have to ignore international standards of justice, morality and human rights.

Again, there is a strong masculine-universalistic premise in these statements.

People whose thinking has been conditioned by less masculine and less universalistic cultural backgrounds do not prevalently seek to combat ethnocentrism, nor do they seek to exert their moral obligations by proactively intervening in the affairs of others. For many such people, one would only contribute to the resolution of someone else's conflict if invited to do so.

I will return to the concept of cultural relativism in Section 1.2.4.

1.2.2 The concept of 'neutrality' in a multicultural context

The examples which I have given above, along with further personal observations, form the foundations for the following points:

1. Opinions concerning 'apathy', 'intrusion', 'cultural relativism' etc. are the product of cultural and other mental conditioning.
2. The concept of 'neutrality' has various possible meanings and connotations, depending on the users involved and their cultures.
3. 'Cultural neutrality' is not identical to 'neutrality' (as it is understood in general Anglo-Saxon usage).
4. 'Mediation' has a number of different meanings in different cultural contexts and should be distinguished from its intercultural counterpart, which I choose to term 'intercultural conflict conciliation', or 'intercultural conciliation' for short. In this paper, I will use 'conciliation' as a generic term to cover mono-cultural mediation and intercultural conciliation.
5. 'Intercultural conflict conciliation' pre-requires cultural neutrality on the part of the conciliator, which in turn pre-requires the latter to be able to relativise all understandings of all situationally-relevant concepts, including, for example, 'neutrality' itself.
6. In simple terms, the intercultural conflict conciliator must be able to be

neutral, un-neutral, proactive or inactive etc., depending on the cultural premises of the actual situation.

7. Whilst the role of the 'mediator' is to be defined in consensus by the conflict-parties, the 'intercultural conflict conciliator' has to apply personal professional judgement in co-defining his/her own role with the conflict-parties. As he/she can only do this after gaining an adequate picture of the pertaining cultural and other factors, the role of the intercultural conciliator may develop and change as the resolution process develops.

8. In operating at the interface between different cultures and ideologies, intercultural conflict conciliation can have no implicit allegiance to e.g. the Post-Postmodern, nor to any other particular globalised or non-globalised form of human ethos[9]. Nevertheless, since the reader is most likely to be a citizen of the Post-Postmodern, I propose that intercultural conflict conciliation can, for him/her, legitimately be an art form which is motivated by a sensation of Beauty underlying the Human Condition.

In order to elucidate these points, I will offer various explanations and also some definitions.

1.2.3 Culture and cultural conflicts

Drawing on the vast available literature on the subject of 'culture', it can be defined as follows:

> *a commonly shared system of perceptions and values;*

> or

> *a group of people who share a certain system of perceptions and values.*

For more details on this subject, the reader is invited to read '*Intercultural Management: The Art of Resolving and Avoiding Conflicts between Cultures*'.[10]

In short, a culture is not necessarily defined by territorial borders, nor necessarily by ethnicity; cultural differences can manifest themselves within a family, e.g. between two generations or between brother and sister. Even the individual

can acquire multiple value-systems and, consequently, experience multiple cultures existing side-by-side inside his/her mind. Also, a culture is not something static, but a phenomenon which changes over time.

A 'cultural conflict' is:

> *the manifestation of dissonance at the interface between two or more cultures at a given point in time.*

Since most conflicts seem to arise as a consequence of value-system dissonance, I am led to ask the question:

> *How many conflicts are not, in fact, intercultural ones?*

Johan Galtung, for example, differentiates between cultural, structural and personal/direct violence, proposing that:

> 'By cultural violence we mean those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence.'[11]

Whilst not going so far as to postulate that all conflicts arise because of competing perception- and value-systems, I propose that most conflicts do indeed have a cultural component.

Accordingly, in order to resolve conflicts sustainably, it can often be helpful to recognise not only where the values clash but, first of all, where the perceptions diverge.

Not uncommonly, I have found that people have been fighting an intense conflict but, because of their differing perception-systems, lacked a common perception of what they were actually fighting about.

Furthermore, I have observed on numerous occasions that conflicts between two parties have been caused, at least in part, by cultural dissonance inside at least one of the parties, i.e. by competing value-systems inside the individual party leading to behaviour which is in itself conflictual. The reader, too, may be able to recall situations where he/she has felt torn between different 'inner voices' and that his/her

behaviour has subsequently lacked coherence also to people in the outside world, thus leading to strained or conflictual relations.

Finally, it should be remembered that the dissonance which gradually reveals itself in a relationship over time[12] as a result of the underlying perception- and value-systems is a manifestation of one or more of the following:

- differing perceptions/values in competition, e.g. ecological preservation vs. economic exploitation;
- identical perceptions/values in competition, e.g. territorial rights.

In other words, a conflict can occur not only because of cultural differences, but also because of cultural overlap. Bitter conflicts between generations in a family can be fought where some of the values are identical, e.g. *the importance of appearance*, but the content differs, e.g. long hair versus short hair, long dresses versus short skirts. The vehemence of the conflict often lies in the equally-distributed importance of the common value, meaning that both parties will be driven to fight equally bitterly by that same common value.

The damage which can be done to the lives of organisations, families and individuals can be so serious at both material and psychological levels that prevention, de-escalation and damage-minimisation are often seen as some of the key duties of those ultimately responsible.

1.2.4 Cultural neutrality and intercultural conflict conciliation

'Cultural neutrality' can be defined as:

> *the art of (being perceived as) feeling no personal leaning to any of the manifestations of perception- or value-systems pertaining in a given situation.*

Consequently, 'intercultural conflict conciliation' involves:

> *the art of contributing cultural neutrality to a conflict in such a way that the dissonance at the cultural roots of the conflict is appropriately resolved.*

In feeling and displaying no personal leaning to any of the pertaining perception- and value-systems at the outset, the intercultural conciliator is able to participate in such a way that the respective cultures of the conflict-parties become increasingly transparent[13] for all the participants, including for the conciliator.

The conciliator is like a dog, which says nothing but sees through its owner's temporary mood-swings and also somehow facilitates communication between family members and/or others, just by being there. [14]

The intercultural conciliator can be compared with an untarnished, flat mirror which provides the possibility:

- for each conflict-party to see its own 'cultural persona' as it really is and, at the same time,
- for each party to see how the other really sees itself in value-system terms.

A non-neutral third-party would create confusing distortions, just like the distorting mirrors in a fairground mirror-hall, and would make the resolution process unnecessarily complex and inefficient. Of course, the conciliator's contribution needs to be made in such a way that the process of transparency takes place in an acceptable way for those concerned, allowing the parties to look in the mirror themselves in their own time, rather than having it pushed in front of their faces and without being coerced into articulating what they see.

The perceptions and/or values which reveal themselves to be at the root of the conflict may be different or identical, as explained above. Dissonance can occur when given cultural factors are the same or different; resonance can also occur when given cultural factors are the same or different. The art of intercultural conflict conciliation lies, therefore, not in identifying where all the cultural differences are, but in facilitating a process whereby the areas of resonance can serve as the foundation for resolving the veritable source of the dissonance. This may be done explicitly or implicitly, depending on the cultures involved. It is interesting how, in conflict situations, the sources of dissonance seems to attract the focus of people's attention and how the areas of

commonality and resonance are blended out, almost as if they do not exist.

The potential unifying power of underlying value-system resonance can be quite strikingly experienced when two parties, which are in conflict with one another, find themselves confronted with a common intruder or enemy. All of a sudden, the previous adversaries combine their forces to combat the new enemy. This was the case in the personal examples which I offered in Section 1.1.1 above and can be recognised in many political and civil disputes.

As the reader is undoubtedly aware, conflicts cannot all be resolved rationally and there are probably very few which can indeed be resolved purely rationally, simply because perceptions and values are major contributors to the emotional identity of a human being.

Peter Watson, in his book '*A Terrible Beauty*', cites the distinction made by David Hume between the 'calm passions' and the 'violent passions', the latter taking priority over reason. [15]

It follows that the art of intercultural conflict conciliation includes the ability to facilitate the resolution of the respective emotional discomforts, if any. It must be recognised that a degree of residual emotional discomfort is probably inevitable. In my personal experience, I find that Traditional Chinese Medicine and the classical teaching of 'I Ching' have much to offer the individual in regaining emotional balance following a conflict-resolution process.

In fact, disharmonies within the individual can also be a major contributor to the outbreak of conflicts in professional and private life. In an ideal world, such disharmonies in the individual should be recognised in advance rather than letting them jeopardise an otherwise fruitful, personal or professional relationship. Many of the resulting tragedies and costs which we so often experience around us could be so simply avoided, not least in the world of business where personal biographies have such far-reaching consequences for the fates and fortunes of others.

One should also realise that the intercultural conciliator does not *a priori* regard the conflicting parties as sharing equal status and rights. The intercultural conciliator does not *a priori* assume that the parties should reach a consensus on any matter related to the conflict, including the role of the conciliator. Further, it is not the intercultural conciliator's role *a priori* to create an atmosphere of relational parity or safeguard 'victims' from 'injustice' in the final solution.

Using the deep-culture terms of Geert Hofstede[16], if a conflict occurs between two cultures with a 'high power-distance', then the conciliator cannot *a priori* assume that the parties interact as equals, even if their contractual relationship is based, for example, on the 50:50 ownership of a joint-venture. In some multicultural constellations, the conflict can only be appropriately resolved if one of the parties is seen, in relational terms, to dominate.

Whilst we experience the latter in certain so-called mono-cultural situations, e.g. where a conflict between a father or mother and a son is deemed to have been appropriately resolved when the originally-dissenting son actually carries out what the parent 'dictated', there is a commonly-held assumption in many Western countries that all other individuals and cultures around the world have equal rights. Hence, such Western countries feel it appropriate to intervene where they perceive inequality, injustice etc.

I have observed numerous international conflicts, also inside Europe, where one party's culture demands it to feel dominant and the other's requires equal status for both. In one case, a major Franco-German alliance, the German managers felt that their French counterparts were constantly seeking to influence all major decisions to their own advantage and that they would never genuinely consider any of the German input. This included a German human-resources initiative to reflect on the quality of the relationship. Many reasons were quoted, including political influence, for the lack of productive cooperation; the fundamental truth was that the two sides had unknowingly got themselves into a relationship of inevitable cultural impasse.

Similar constellations occur between people from North America and China, Switzerland and Latin America, England and Western Africa etc. The reader will be aware that the impasse-issue of 'sovereignty' keeps recurring with particular poignancy not only in international politics, but also in everyday business situations and in private relationships.

This is where the intercultural conciliator can play a vital and highly valuable role:

- firstly, by making the hidden, but veritable roots of the conflict and also the reality of the intercultural relationship transparent and
- secondly, if the parties wish or are compelled to continue their relationship, by facilitating the creation of a new 'interface culture' which will work productively and, at the same time, take into account the handling of the respective cultures which are being represented at that interface.

Returning to the matter of cultural relativism mentioned in Section 1.2.1, it is perhaps interesting to realise that many of its proponents base their thinking on an understanding which runs roughly as follows:

- all the cultures which exist are naturally-occurring forms of social life and, as such, have the natural right to be equally respected, rather like all naturally-occurring species; consequently:
- all cultures should be respected, whether they regard the rights of all individuals as being equal or not and
- all cultures should be respected whether they respect the validity of other cultures or not.

On the other hand, some of the opponents of cultural relativism effectively base their thinking on the understanding that:

- those cultures which respect the rights of individuals as being equal are superior to other cultures and
- the individualised ethos of human rights should be adopted and practised by all other cultures (see Section 1.2.2).

Other adversaries of cultural relativism base their position on the understanding that:

- their own culture is not a matter for relativisation (in some cases, *de facto* superior to others; in other cases, not).

The intercultural conciliator's role precludes him/her, in my opinion, from taking a position for or against cultural relativism. The fact is that these divergent understandings exist and that their respective holders, too, may require an intercultural conciliator to help them resolve their differences.

A culture, as mentioned above, is a living phenomenon. Its underlying perception- and value-system will quite probably change over time. History and personal experience show us that a later generation may reject a solution which its forefathers were a party to. Consequently, it cannot be an implicit part of the intercultural conciliator's role to ensure that a given solution will be accepted by subsequent members of the same culture, simply and logically because the 'culture' is no longer 'the same'. The fact that human nature in certain cultures is prone to re-evaluate the past with the eyes of today is a fact of life.

It also follows from the arguments and definitions presented above that the intercultural conciliator is not *a priori* a peace-maker. In other words, if the parties involved behold that it is appropriate to resolve their conflict by war, then that is the path to be followed.

Of course, much hangs on the understanding of the word 'appropriate' and who is the 'beholder'. What is appropriate for one party may not be appropriate for another, for cultural and other reasons, of course. This shows us that the argumentation about appropriateness in the case of cultural conflicts is circular and that the circularity cannot be overcome by addressing the quandary of who is an appropriate beholder and who is not, since that is also culturally defined.

Fortunately for the theorists, the practical reality of living in a multicultural world means:

- that there are physical limits to the number of interfaces which can be addressed at any one time and
- that those interfaces, and the cultures behind them, are in continuous flux.

In Section 2 of this paper, I will address the value to be tapped from the conciliator's cultural neutrality by both directly- and indirectly-affected parties.

Section 2 – Recognising Cultural Neutrality and its Value

Given the definition of 'culture' offered in Section 1.2.3, which extends its scope beyond ethnicity and nationality, cultural neutrality holds significant potential value for individuals, groups and organisations, as also for indirectly-affected third-parties, including the social and natural environment, e.g.:

- in civil disputes between individuals and/or companies;
- in political and ideological disputes on a local, national or international level;
- in religious conflicts in families and in society at-large;
- in interpersonal or interdepartmental conflicts at the workplace;
- in situations where numerous forces and interests clash at a common interface, e.g. corporate senior management, project management etc.;
- in marital and family difficulties;
- in times of stress related to cultural change;
- in situations where third-parties feel negatively affected by the conflicts of others.

In all of these types of situations, it is very often the case that the actual roots of the problem lie in dissonance between perception- and value-systems, which are invariably linked to conflicts of character etc. and often manifested in so-called 'conflicts of interest'. Whilst I do not wish to suggest that cultural neutrality is a universally-applicable tool, I do propose that it is one of the options which ideally people in such situations should be aware of - and have access to - and that it does significantly improve the resolution of the problem.

The resolution of conflicts at their most fundamental level, i.e. the level of underlying value-systems, is the most efficient way to create sustainable solutions for productive co-existence.

Accordingly, for many Western cultures at least, the value of cultural neutrality, in such scenarios as those listed above, could include:

- reaching a sustainable resolution of the conflict with maximum efficiency;
- immediate saving of financial costs and retention of value (e.g. the material value of joint-undertakings & investments and the social capital created to-date) even if the parties agree to part their ways;
- restoring respect through the removal of culturally-created distortions of original motivations and intentions;
- immediate saving of emotional stress and of negative attention-focus;
- recognising and addressing the veritable sources of one's own behavioural patterns which would otherwise continue to create relational difficulties and conflicts with others later;
- long-term saving of financial costs (i.e. through avoided repetition of the same mistakes) and improvement of value to others as a partner in professional and/or private life.

I will be addressing the applications and the value of cultural neutrality in Section 2.1, and particularly in Section 2.2.

First of all, however, it needs to be recognised that cultural neutrality and the intercultural conflict conciliator are regarded by many 'uninitiated' people to have negative value, not positive value, for several reasons.

On the one hand, there is widespread scepticism towards neutrality, enhanced by examples of nations, institutions and individuals who had purported to be neutral and were later discovered not to have been so. I will examine some of the main reasons for this scepticism below.

On the other hand, the contribution of an intercultural conciliator can be seen by many conflict-parties as psychologically threatening:

- in that the conciliator does not (and should not) fulfil many of their initial expectations - which can create an understandable feeling of uneasiness and insecurity and/or
- in that the parties intuitively realise that their values and perceptions will become increasingly transparent, a process which, for many, could constitute a threat to their identity and integrity.

Unless these factors are understood and overcome, the value of cultural neutrality will indeed remain negative.

After examining them in more depth, I will describe and begin to quantify the positive value which cultural neutrality has to offer.

2.1 Perceived neutrality

The examples given in Section 1.1 above of skin-colour, gender, language, hierarchical function etc. have shown that the conciliator must, above all, be **perceived** to be neutral.

Being neutral on the inside is far from being perceived as neutral from the outside, and it is only the latter which is relevant and holds potential value for parties affected by conflict.

In order for conflict-parties to perceive a conciliator as being neutral, various challenges like those already mentioned need to be overcome. They also include a natural scepticism towards neutrality in general.

2.1.1 Sceptical attitudes towards neutrality

In my own experience of conflict-resolution processes, two particular sources of scepticism about the conciliator's neutrality manifest themselves repeatedly.

Firstly, many people quite simply find it difficult to relate to a neutral human being, i.e. someone who displays no fixed opinions or values.

This is understandable, of course, because human relations are built on quite the opposite foundation, namely of resonating opinions and values. Couples falling in love, for example, can be observed to be constantly seeking and creating a common value-system.

Trust between individuals is often cited as an absolute pre-requisite for productive relationships. Trust is generally based on the reciprocal fulfilment of expectations, which, in turn, are value-system based.

The intercultural conciliator, cannot and should not, of course, fulfil the expectations of the parties-in-conflict, at least in the areas of value-system-discord pertaining between the parties, and consequently cannot and should not be 'trusted' in the normal sense of the term.

In other words, the conflict-parties can easily find themselves in the dilemma of not only not trusting each other, but also of not trusting the conciliator. In the first case, they do not trust each other because of value-system dissonance and, in the second case, they do not trust the conciliator because none of the pertinent values are apparent for the individual party to 'latch on to'.

In fact, the intercultural conciliator can easily be perceived as a bit of a 'weirdo' in society at-large because of his/her lack of tangibility, a matter which I address in greater depth in Section 2.1.4.

It is perhaps for this reason that certain schools of mediation teach their students to tell stories or give introductions about their personal biographies and illustrative experiences prior to commencing the actual conflict-resolution process.

Secondly, conflict-parties often fear the neutral conciliator for reasons which include:

- the possible dismantling of the position of strength and of the defence mechanisms which they have been painstakingly building against the other;
- the potential revelation of the full truth and their consequent loss-of-face;
- the feeling of insecurity associated with unpredictable outcomes and also with the absence of any authority at all to prescribe what is right or wrong.

In my experience, these fears begin to disperse once the parties realise that they are not being judged by the conciliator. The latter's comportment in the very first minutes of the resolution process has a major impact on the parties' levels of openness and the reinforcement or dissipation of their fears. I have often been told that a case can only be resolved through mediation if the parties are really willing and open to solve it. On the other hand, I have noticed in practice how people who show themselves to be very uncooperative initially can become highly participative and constructive, depending on how they feel treated by the conciliator. I think that the latter has to achieve a crucial balance between:

- not constituting a threat to a party's integrity and
- simultaneously facilitating transparency at such a fundamental level that the conflict is resolved at its roots.

Many people develop ways of protecting their personal integrity when directly confronted with a conflict situation: they do this because they realise, at least subconsciously, that it is their own personality and circumstances, of course, which got them into the situation. Once they realise that the conciliation process offers them a way not only of resolving the current conflict, but also of preventing the pattern from recurring in their future lives, the potentially negative threat to their identity and integrity can turn into a positive opportunity.

Thirdly, it is natural that people who have never had the opportunity to develop their own ability to be neutral will find it difficult to be convinced about someone else's neutrality. Occasionally, it can take several months before a conflict-party fully recognises and appreciates the conciliator's neutrality, presumably after certain personal reflection.

One thing which helps people to overcome their natural barriers towards the neutral conciliator is education. There is a considerable wealth of literature and training possibilities on the subject of conflict-resolution and mediation, all of which sensitise the public at-large to the benefits of mediation and to the characteristics to look for in a potential mediator, e.g. neutrality.

Personally, I think that there is further way of easing the step to a neutral conciliator. This is pure reflection based on personal experience: it runs as follows:

> How comforting it is to have someone who just listens,

- listens, that is, without comment,
- without adding some statement which is totally out-of-context, i.e. from their own lives,
- without passing some value-judgement, good or bad, on the events which you wanted to relate before you were interrupted by your 'listener';
- listens, that is, until you have finished,

- until you have finished talking to yourself in the presence of another human being,
- until you have finished coming to terms with the real truth of the situation through having to be honest to yourself in the presence of that other human being,
- until you have finished articulating your emotions, uncensored and uninhibited by judgemental others.

> How seldom it is to have this opportunity, i.e.

- an opportunity which can only be given to us by someone who, on that occasion, contributes their neutrality.

It is common knowledge that some people talk to voiceless, animate or inanimate objects - or that they enter into their particular form of spirituality - and thereby achieve something similar.

The difference in having a human being as one's listening-partner, and a non-judgemental one at-that, lies in the room which is created for increased self-honesty, veracity and respect[17] through the mere presence of another human conscience, which does not respond, 'disturb' or represent some higher judgemental authority.

I find that this very special form of interaction brings about a more holistic solution more efficiently, with the significant advantage that it is self-generated. The presence and contributions of the neutral conciliator allow us to confront ourselves with the truth of how we co-created a conflict, thus allowing us to recognise how we can find our way out of it again.

A further point for reflection is to imagine and/or remember:

> How comforting it is to have someone who does not align his/herself with any point of the position of the party with whom you are in conflict.

Whilst one might initially prefer partiality towards one's own position, it is comforting to realise that the conciliator is at least not in unison with the position of the other party.

Of course, the presence of the neutral conciliator allows both conflict-parties to arrive at the same levels of self-honesty, veracity and respect[18], which are necessary for the resolution process to be a joint undertaking.

In many corporate environments, managers need not only to be seen as impartial by the employees around them, but are also required by their corporate cultures to:

- promote the openness and self-responsibility of their staff and
- facilitate the sustainable resolution of conflicts.

If the general scepticism towards neutrality could be overcome, more managers would be able to apply the skills of intercultural conciliation in the workplace themselves, and thereby reduce the need for outsourcing.

2.1.2 Neutrality in the eyes of the beholder

For the lawyer, the task of putting a client at ease at the very beginning of legal proceedings is relatively simple, unless, of course, the lawyer is presented with what he/she sees to be a hopeless case. Generally, the lawyer will listen, nod and question with the purpose of:

- building the client's position;
- pointing out where the case is weak;
- filtering out where its strengths are;
- creating a winnable strategy.

Conflict-parties who approach an intercultural conciliator, on the other hand, should **only** feel at ease once they realise that he/she is **not** nodding at, or otherwise behaving in agreement with, the underlying values or the content of either party's statements.

As a general rule, conciliators can, in my opinion, enhance their contribution by not interviewing conflict-parties separately for the following reasons:

1. The conflict-party will not have the opportunity to see the conciliator 'failing' to respond in a confirming fashion to the position of the other party/parties and, consequently, not be able to witness the fact that each party is receiving identical treatment, thus

missing the opportunity to witness the conciliator's neutrality firsthand.
2. The conflict-party will miss the opportunity to gain confidence in the situation by virtue of the fact that each of the conflict-parties is in an identical position of initial uneasiness.
3. The intercultural conciliator will have a much better opportunity to experience the true dynamics of the relationship and thus avoid making false assumptions about the underlying cultures.

There are situations, of course, where it is necessary and/or culturally more appropriate for the conciliator to meet with the conflict-parties separately. In such cases, I recommend that the conciliator considers the option of suggesting that the parties each send a proxy to the conflict-resolution table, i.e. for the first two reasons given above.

2.1.3 How does the beholder recognise cultural neutrality when it is present?

The very nature of the role of being culturally neutral means that there can be no universally applicable behavioural rules by which to recognise it.

However, being sensitised to deep-cultural differences makes it much easier for people to recognise cultural neutrality and to understand the concomitant flexibility in the behaviour of the intercultural conciliator.

As an example, I will assume a situation in which the cultures of the conflict-parties allow them each to:

- want to resolve their conflict through dialogue
- in each other's presence and
- with the assistance of a third-party conciliator.

As mentioned above:

- a 'mediator' will not respond in a confirming fashion to the content of anything presented, whereas
- an 'intercultural conciliator' will also not respond in a confirming fashion to any of the implicit values placed on any

of the content during its initial presentation.

During the course of the resolution process, however, it may become appropriate for the intercultural conciliator to become 'un-neutral' and to be perceived to help parties to align themselves with each other's viewpoints, i.e. with the values given to contents. To some conflict-parties, this could be confusing and disconcerting if they:

- are unfamiliar with cultural neutrality and/or
- have not had enough opportunity to experience the conciliator 'at work' and/or
- have not had enough opportunity to understand the cultural dynamics at the root of the conflict and of the relationship.

In other words, assuming that the conciliator is genuinely culturally neutral, the beholder needs to be able to recognise that that the conciliator's cultural flexibility is a further expression, or 'proof', of his/her cultural neutrality and not, for example, a lack of professionalism.

As mentioned earlier, cultural neutrality goes beyond the sort of neutrality which many Western cultures understand, i.e. positional impartiality.

Cultural neutrality involves the art of taking no personal stand on any one perception or value-system **and** of flowing with those present in the contextually most appropriate way. The intercultural conciliator behaves so as not to hinder a natural resolution process and facilitates the necessary degree of intercultural resonance for the conflict to be resolved. It is these qualities which the parties should look for in an intercultural conciliator.

The cultures of some conflict-parties may also require that the conciliator be very explicitly transparent and justificatory about his/her behaviour when moving into a phase of un-neutrality; other cultures do not pre-require such explicitness or justification.

In practice, when parties from different cultures interact in a relationship, whether personal, business or political, there is an amount of 'cross-fertilisation' as well as potential dissonance. When the dissonance creates conflict and a conciliator becomes involved in order to facilitate its resolution, the latter needs also to be sensitive to any cross-fertilisation which has taken place. This means that the conciliator must be so culturally flexible as to have no pre-conceived notions about any cultures at all. Probably, those people who have accumulated a lot of knowledge about specific cultures are not necessarily the best intercultural conciliators, unless they can put that knowledge completely to one side.

Interestingly, the conflict-resolution process itself can also contribute to cross-fertilisation as each party gains access to the other's true motives and value-systems. In intensively experiencing cultural neutrality 'at work', a party's intercultural competence can develop significantly.

As mentioned earlier, parties may possess multiple cultures simultaneously, i.e. in addition to possible cross-fertilisation effects. Sometimes, resolving a cultural conflict includes unifying competing cultures inside the individual party either prior to the resolution process, i.e. to pave the way for a more simple process, and/or afterwards, i.e. to come to terms with the final result. If the solution is to be a sustainable one, the intercultural conciliator may often need to guide a conflict-party through this post-conflict process, either personally or through recommending a competent colleague.

2.1.4 Cultural neutrality inside the conciliator

In my opinion, neither neutrality nor cultural neutrality can be feigned. It might well be the case, as explained earlier, that a conciliator is not perceived as neutral for no reason of his/her own. It might also happen that the conciliator makes a human mistake and errs from cultural neutrality, if only for a few critical seconds or minutes. However, the outside world will very soon notice if the conciliator is pretending to be neutral when he/she really isn't; the outside world will soon notice if the conciliator has ulterior motives. I have also noticed how conflict-parties are prone to test a conciliator's neutrality, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, and will soon arrive at their own truth. Body language, including the movements and the positioning of the eye, are one of the most revealing indicators of genuineness in any person, including to the untrained eye.

Whilst being 'partly neutral' is, by definition - in Western cultures at least - not adequate for being neutral, the process of attaining cultural neutrality is not something which, like riding a bicycle, can be achieved and thereafter not need continuous development. The intercultural conciliator will be continuously confronted with new situations which reveal hitherto undiscovered cultural premises in his/her mind. In such cases, the intercultural conciliator has the opportunity to relativise them, just like all the previously encountered ones. This may not happen immediately for a number of reasons which include:

- the psychological stability of the conciliator at that point in time;
- the social environment which might make it more appropriate to remain part of the group rather than ostracising him/herself (and any loved ones also present) into the 'weirdo' role;
- the physical situation where it could be potentially suicidal to abandon certain values.

Nevertheless, the intercultural conciliator's mind is prone to processing such discoveries sooner or later, hopefully before they actually become relevant in a conflict-resolution process.

As mentioned above, knowledge about specific cultures is a potentially dangerous thing. Henry Kissinger was once quoted as saying that the problem with American intelligence is that it is American. [19] The personal confidence associated with cultural neutrality is built not on increasing knowledge, but on decreasing expectations.

The intercultural conciliator, like other human beings, exists in a multicultural environment and needs several co-existing cultures inside him/her in order to function socially in everyday life. It is simply a matter of definition whether we view cultural neutrality as just another culture or not. More importantly, the intercultural conciliator will tend, while functioning in everyday life, i.e. listening, reading, conversing etc., to experience the following:

- the overlay of the voice of cultural neutrality and/or
- multiple voices from different cultural perspectives.

The effect of this continuous experience will auto-didactically serve to refine the conciliator's faculty of neutrality.

Personally, I do not think it is possible to function as a professional intercultural conciliator over extended lengths of time without sufficient mental 'down-time' to mentally recuperate and to process one's experiences. One also needs to tap motivational energy from somewhere, which, as mentioned in Section 1.2.2, for some may lie in a sensation of Beauty in the human condition.

2.2 Cultural neutrality in practice

As is so very often the case in everyday life, material pressures and psychological forces can have a major impact on people's thinking. Reticent attitudes towards cultural neutrality can change dramatically once its material and psychological value are appreciated. As mentioned above, I propose that cultural neutrality harbours immense potential value in financial, social and environmental terms at micro- and macro-levels.

2.2.1 Civil disputes

What are people looking for when they engage in civil disputes?

It is often a combination of:

- face-saving, defence of one's own position and minimisation of one's own liability;
- allocation of the financial, structural and moral responsibility for negative events to the other party;
- receiving compensation for damages;
- minimisation of costs for resolving the dispute;
- minimisation of any potential subsequent negative consequences.

Legally-fought conflicts are known to be potentially very costly affairs in terms of legal fees, effort, time and emotions. Mediated processes, on the other hand, are known to be more efficient, to save financial and emotional drain and also to minimise collateral damage to third parties who could otherwise file costly claims for damages.

We can begin to quantify the financial benefit of mediated conflict-resolution, for mono- and multicultural civil disputes alike, as follows:

1. The fees which have to be paid by the conflict-parties to a conciliator will be halved simply because the conflict-parties are jointly dealing with one conciliator rather than each party dealing with its own separate lawyer. However, the financial savings on fees are considerably greater than 50%, as I will show below.

2. The time needed for building a legal case against another party is generally quite considerable since it involves a lot time on the part of the appointed lawyer in questioning the client, in examining the potential evidence, in analysis of the case, in drafting pleadings and in the subsequent discussions with the client. The lawyer may also have to conduct many hours of legal research and/or to draw on the time of other professionals in the same law-firm in order to prepare and conduct the case: consequently, the client has to pay not only for the time of each lawyer, but also for the time they collectively spend in discussing the case and in sharing the results of their various findings and contributions. In a complex business case, for example, a senior attorney might charge $500 per hour and require two further colleagues at $450 and $350 respectively: each joint internal discussion would then cost the client $1400 per hour, and each discussion with the client would cost the same if all three are present. Having prepared the case, it is then taken to court and many more hours are spent in presentation, in discovery phases of evidence-collection and examination, in deposition of witnesses, in case-argument etc. Then, of course, one has to calculate the time spent by paralegal support staff throughout the whole case. Whilst all of this work is mostly conducted with the highest levels of professional and ethical standards, the inherent systemic redundancy and the questionable strategy of preparing separate, counter-positioned cases in the first place can be viewed as highly inefficient and costly for the parties involved, let alone for the law courts whose resources are also limited.

3. The hourly fees for a mediator or intercultural conciliator are generally lower than those of lawyers. The number of hours will obviously be significantly less and the fees will be shared, anyway, by the parties involved.

4. In 2006 in the United States, corporate legal costs rose by 20% and could increase by a further 9% in 2007, according to a survey of the Fortune 1000 companies which was cited in a report in the Financial Times on January 2nd, 2007. Outsourced legal counsel alone cost these companies a total of $56.4 bn. The potential fees-savings to be gained by choosing mediated conflict-resolution at the macro-level are enormous, just as they are to each individual company and to each individual person who gets caught up in a serious conflict.

5. Of course, the fees-savings need to be placed in relation to the financial rewards or losses which can result from resolving a conflict through litigation or mediation. There are many cases where the evidence is so overwhelming, and the case is so clear-cut, that substantial rewards are to be gained through litigation, including the reimbursement of any legal fees. In such cases, the lawyers may also be prepared to work on contingency. In very many civil cases, however, 'the cake' of money which is available to be tapped into, even if the case is won, is limited; or the case itself is not clear-cut enough to guarantee that one party will win and the other will lose. Even for those parties which do stand to win, there is a further calculation to be made, i.e. how much loss of value will result from collateral damage, e.g.

   - crippling of a joint-venture,
   - loss of market image,
   - creation of precedents for other parties to file damage-claims,
   - erosion of 'social capital' or
   - negative impact on corporate culture etc.?

Obviously, each case needs ideally to be looked at rationally and holistically on its own merits. In reality however, lawyers are confronted with a high

percentage of clients who are primarily driven by psychological motives stemming from feelings of extreme disappointment, of revenge, of anger and from the need to save personal face etc.

Those conflict-parties who have knowledge of, and access to, both the juridical and the mediated resolution options probably now do a mental 'trade-off' between the material and psychological advantages and disadvantages[20] contained in each option, before making their choice. Others make an initial choice, typically for the legal route, and then change course once various pressures begin to add a new set of material and psychological disadvantages to their lives, namely rising costs and rising effort with increasingly doubtful chances of winning.

Lawyers themselves are becoming interested in mediation and are obtaining the corresponding qualifications for a variety of reasons. Many lawyers realise from experience and/or personal conviction that many conflicts can be resolved much more efficiently out of court. The increasing awareness of the benefits of mediated conflict-resolution in the public at-large has meant that many law-firms have had to secure their 'market-position' by offering mediation services alongside their traditional litigation services. Many lawyers whom I know find themselves today confronted with the following dilemmas:

- Should he/she stress to the client that the case at-hand is one of those clear cases which do not lend themselves to mediation and thereby run the risk that the client could think that the only reason for saying this is an ulterior financial motive on his/her own part?
- Should he/she run the risk of proposing a mediated resolution process and run the risk that the client would go to another lawyer who would be prepared to fight the case in court, or in hindsight regret not having gone to another lawyer?[21]

In my personal opinion, litigation and mediated conciliation need not be mutually exclusive. A lawyer brings certain skills-sets to the table and a conciliator brings others; their personal thinking-styles[22] need to be different; their fundamental approaches need to be different.

The toughest lawyers know how to analyse and how to be divisive; they are strong on expectations. The best conciliators know how to facilitate synthesis and they are necessarily weak on expectations (see Section 2.1.4). In cross-border disputes, lawyers contribute their knowledge of international law, whereas conciliators contribute their intercultural skills. Clearly, the two professions complement each other.

Corporate legal departments can benefit from this complementarity by working closely with conciliators and thereby significantly reducing their company's legal costs.

Mediation is, of course, not something newly invented, even though the actual activity may not have had this exact name. In Western cultures, the trend of automatically seeking one's personal lawyer in cases of serious conflict has grown as people have recognised the potential material and psychological value to be obtained by pushing the responsibility for negative events and consequences onto others through litigation, i.e. in-line with an overall cultural trend of increased individualism and masculinity[23] and atomism[24]; this trend is now being complemented by the option of mediation and, as mentioned earlier, its prescription by legal systems in certain countries.

The financial and psychological value of cultural neutrality in international civil disputes can be evaluated analogously. One merely needs to factor in the increased costs, risks, effort and potential stress which will be incurred if one is fighting a case in a foreign court. If intercultural conciliation is chosen, any extra costs which might be incurred, e.g. in travelling to a neutral location for the conciliation process, are minimal compared with those for a litigated approach.

The value of cultural neutrality, as opposed to neutrality (see Sections 1.2.2 to 1.2.4), is obviously greater in cases of cultural conflict (see Section 1.2.3) simply because it is the 'right tool for the right job'. Cultural conflicts are generally riddled with complexities on both substantive and emotional levels, all resulting from divergent perceptions and from value-system dissonance. By allowing the roots of the conflict to be quickly and accurately located, the contribution of the intercultural conciliator will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the resolution process.

Among the most significant sources of value to be obtained from applying cultural neutrality in cases of conflict is the unravelling of each party's true intent.[25] I have found on numerous occasions that different underlying cultures have led one party to generate grossly distorted and negative images of the other's true original intent; more than this, the perceived intent has subsequently become an irreversible reality in the relationship by its catalysation of further negative dynamics, i.e. of serious reciprocal suspicions, reactions and counter-reactions. Whilst this phenomenon is a fact of life in intercultural relationships, the experience of relief is overwhelming, when the one party feels that its true intentions have at last been recognised and the other party realises that its suspicions were unfounded. The value to be gained here can be both psychological and material, i.e. by virtue of the possible consequence that the relations can often be mended and, for example, a business venture or a partnership can be saved from ruin.

From a societal point of view, intercultural conflict conciliation offers increased chances that conflict-parties will recognise their own role in the co-creation of a conflict as a consequence of recognising and understanding the underlying value-systems. The advantages of this effect are manifold and far-reaching.

2.2.2 Political, societal and religious conflicts

On a local, national and international level, conflicts very clearly arise because of dissonance between value- or belief-systems.

Some factions are ethnically and/or religiously defined and motivated; others are built on different approaches to running society. Differing priorities are given to various values.

At all three levels, the value-systems involved are often very consciously demarcated from one another by their proponents. The conflict is deliberate and intentionally sustainable.

In other cases, the mere co-existence of 'competing' political leanings, religious beliefs, gender attitudes etc. creates a need for respectful, if not productive interaction.

In family-life, for example, even the possibility of a love-relationship developing between e.g. a Catholic and a Protestant, a Republican and a Democrat, or two people of the same sex, can create intense conflicts, with sometimes unrecognisable behaviour on the part of parents and children alike, occasionally with very tragic consequences.

Problems on a much larger scale can break out at the national and international level, as we see everyday in the media, where people are willing to sacrifice their earthly lives for what they believe in.

On many occasions, the parties involved do not want third-party 'intrusion' and the conflict will run its natural course.

Sometimes, help is sought by the parties involved and, sometimes, a higher body, e.g. the government, will feel compelled to try to induce peace between the conflicting factions. In these types of cases, the intercultural conciliator is undoubtedly one of the best-qualified people to help the parties resolve their differences. For cases of religious conflict, it should be remembered that cultural neutrality by definition includes religious neutrality, but is not equivalent, of course, to agnosticism etc. The intercultural conciliator is also aware that members of some religions may not be able to reflect about their religion and consequently may not be able to relativise its validity it by acknowledging the valid existence of another.

The intercultural conflict conciliator may be able to contribute meaningfully to individuals who experience conflicts inside themselves, e.g. between 'competing' political leanings, religious beliefs or ideologies. As an example, there are young people in places like Istanbul who feel torn in their personal identity between Eastern and Western values. As mentioned earlier, such internal conflicts in the individual can cause challenging conflicts in their personal and professional lives and relationships with others.

2.2.3 Business and organisational settings

For both profit and not-for-profit organisations, the needs of the stakeholders include:

- organisational efficiency;
- the fulfilment of material motivations;
- the fulfilment of psychological motives.

As a contribution to each of these, much preventive action is already undertaken through

personnel selection and personnel development to improve the interfacing skills of an organisation's employees and thereby to reduce the number and the negative impact of conflicts.

In their book '*Living Leadership*', Binney, Wilke and Williams begin the conclusion to their 4-year research findings as follows:

> 'Leading is a social, in-between activity.'[26]

Leaders who were perceived as leaders by their employees at the time of this research project generally were seen not as autocratic heroes but as excellent interfacers.

It is interesting to note that, writing two decades earlier in 1982, Donald Michael, recognised the need for a 'new competence' for managers which included:

> 'coping with value conflicts'.[27]

As I have already mentioned, the manager in a multicultural workforce needs to be, and perceived to be, racially impartial. Given the numerous value-systems which employees bring to, and apply in the workplace, there are few situations today which are not multicultural ones inside an organisation, let alone at the interface with the outside world.

However, it seems unlikely that cultural neutrality and the skills of intercultural conciliation will be in-sourced as a core competence inside business organisations until 'personal credibility' is re-defined. The latter is generally still defined today on an understanding of 'integrity' which does not allow for cultural neutrality to be included. A person who flows with the different values pertaining in different situations is generally regarded as unreliable, untrustworthy, lacking in personal credibility and even as acting against the interests of the company. Clearly, it will be more efficient in the long-term to capitalise on the value of cultural neutrality by anchoring it inside a company.

In cases where conflicts do break out, either inside an organisation or with an external partner, reactions can take on one of at least two forms:

A. Strategies which are similar to those cited above for civil disputes:

- face-saving, defending one's own/the company's position and minimising one's own/the company's liability;
- allocating the financial, structural and moral responsibility for negative events to the other party;
- receiving compensation for damages;
- minimising the costs for resolving the dispute;
- minimising any potential subsequent negative consequences;

or

B. Strategies which seek to:
- resolve the immediate conflict at its veritable roots;
- induce individual and organisational learning and
- increase long-term efficiency.

The two sets of strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but are clearly different in their basic approach.

The immediate protection of the company's interests is, of course, crucial to its survival, particularly when confronted with massive claims for damages. Most large organisations have their own legal departments for this purpose. If, however, the step to the legal department and/or to external legal counsel becomes routine and unreflected, then it is unlikely that strategies like those in (B) above will establish themselves with any prevalence in an organisation. Instead, costs for internal legal departments and outsourced counsel are prone to increase.[28] On top of this, the culture of the market economy programmes individuals to protect their own interests at least as strongly as those of their employer. The very real fear of job-loss and/or of personal liability tends in reality to focus the individual's mind on the type of strategy laid out in (A) above.

The longer-term strategies, which focus on increasing efficiency through organisational learning, tend to surface when people have the opportunity to withdraw from their daily workplace, e.g. in seminars and workshops, and when they are discussing matters which do not immediately involve themselves.

The ultimate responsibility for guiding an organisation predominantly towards the strategies of (A) or (B), however, lies in the hands of senior management.

Concerning the macro-level of international business - and of international politics which today is so closely interlinked with it - the sooner the value of cultural neutrality is recognised, the sooner the Western embodiment of globalisation will be able, in my opinion, to escape from the confines of its current form. [29]

2.2.4 Third-party collateral damage

The third-party which involuntarily stands to suffer negatively from conflicts created by others can also be an involuntary beneficiary of conflict conciliation, both in mono- and multi-cultural situations. Quite simply, the better and the faster any conflict is resolved, the greater the chances that collateral damage is recognised and minimised.

In all cases of conflict, it surpasses the role of the conciliator to be a surrogate for third-parties during the resolution process, or even to take the initiative to call them to the table at the beginning.

Third parties may, of course, have the opportunity to identify and proclaim themselves to be a party to the resolution process. This possibility will depend on numerous factors including:

- the third-party's own culture (e.g. does it allow its members to be proactive in defending their position?);
- the culture of the other participants;
- general awareness of existing or potential collateral damage.

In practice, the resolution of conflicts at the level of the pertaining value-systems, i.e. at the cultural level, does tend to bring third-party considerations naturally into the resolution process simply because values concern attitudes and priorities relating to oneself in one's social and physical environment. The core values of human beings are, of course, linked to their basic needs. These include the survival of their culture which, in turn, requires a social and physical environment in which to exist. Since there is considerable value-system resonance at this level between most conflict-parties, regardless of the original content of the conflict, issues of collateral damage, including environmental damage, can quite naturally surface during the resolution process.

As mentioned in Section 1.2.4, there are physical limits to the number of interfaces which can be handled in any one conflict-resolution process and the world's cultures are in a state of continuous flux. If it is the case that a third-party has not been involved or considered in a certain resolution process, but feels that it should have been, then this matter can be addressed in a subsequent conflict-resolution process. The party which originally suffered indirectly now becomes directly involved in the conciliation process.

Conclusion

Intercultural conflict conciliation can, in my opinion, take no stand on issues like victimisation, Darwinism, nor ecological sustainability. The practice of cultural neutrality does not stand in the way of the natural order of things, but it does provide a means by which that natural order can change[30] - and therein lies its immense material, social and environmental value.

Notes and References

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2. See Robinson, S.D.G., *Intercultural Management, The art of resolving and avoiding conflicts between cultures*, 5C Institute, Zug, 1995

3. For some interesting insights into the role of culture in negotiations on water resources, see Faure, G., and Rubin, J., (Eds), *Culture and Negotiation*, Sage, London, 1993

4. See Hofstede, G., *Masculinity and Femininity*, Sage, London, 1998

5. See Hampden Turner, C., *The Seven Cultures of Capitalism*, Doubleday, London 1993

6. Mayer, Op. cit. and Cobb, Op. cit.

7. See Avruch, K., *Culture and Conflict Resolution*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C., 1998, pages 49-50

8. Kottak, C., *Mirror for Humanity*, McGraw-Hill, Boston, 1999, pages 30-31

9. See Section 2.1.4 and also Jameson, F., *The Cultural Turn, Selected writings on the postmodern 1983-1998*, Verso, London, 1998 and also Adam, B. and Allan, S. (Eds.), *Theorizing Culture, An interdisciplinary critique after postmodernism*, UCL, London, 1995. See also Bielefeldt, H., *Philosophie der Menschenrechte, Grundlagen eines weltweiten Freiheitsethos*, Primus, Darmstadt, 1998

10. See Robinson, Op. cit.

11. See Galtung, J., *Cultural Violence*, in *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, 1990, pages 291-295

12. See Robinson, S.D.G., *Pourquoi nombre d'alliances internationals échouent*, L'Agefi – Le Guide des PME, Geneva, 2002

13. Transparency can take on various forms and need not necessarily be analytic. See also the 'etic/emic' discussions in e.g. Augsburger, D., *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures*, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, 1992 and in Howard M. and Rothman, J. (Eds.), *Theory and Practice in Ethnic Conflict Management*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999

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15. See Watson, P., *A Terrible Beauty*, Phoenix, London, 2000, page 678

16. Hofstede, G., *Cultures and Organisations*, McGraw Hill, London 1991

17. The three 'cornerstone principles' ['self-honesty', 'veracity' and 'respect'] for the success of certain conflict-resolution processes were developed at the 5C Centre for Cross-Cultural Conflict Conciliation in cooperation with Constantin Peer. There are, of course, numerous conflict situations and cultural constellations where these principles cannot appropriately be applied.

18. Ibid.

19. Henry Kissinger – source unknown

20. See the discussion in Section 2.1.1

21. After deep conflicts, many people experience bad feelings; these include the feeling that they could have done better at the settlement stage. Such feelings appear to me to be most common when the conflict-parties have decided to discontinue their relationship.

22. For more information on thinking styles see, for example, Hermann, N., *The Creative Brain*, Brain Books, North Carolina, 1988

23. See Hofstede, Op. cit.

24. See Hampden-Turner, Op. cit.

25. See Robinson, S.D.G., *The Fundamental Question of Intent in Joint-Ventures and Acquisitions*, 5C Institute, Zug, 1993

26. Binney, G., Wilke, G., Williams, C., *Living Leadership*, FT Prentice Hall, Harlow, 2005, page 242

27. See Michael, D., *Planning – And Learning From It*, in Richardson, J., *Making It Happen*, Washington D.C., US Association for the Club of Rome, 1982 pages 175-180 cited in Bennis, W., and Nanus, B., *Leaders*, Harper & Row, London 1985

28. See reference to Financial Times report of January 2nd, 2007 in Section 2.2.1

29. See Saul, J.R., *The Collapse of Globalism*, Overlook, New York, 2005 and Carroll, J., *The Wreck of Western Culture*, Carlton, Victoria, Australia, 2004

30. See Robinson, S.D.G., *Negotiation or Mediation? – Two different paths into the 21st century for international relations in business and politics*, 5C Institute, Zug, 1995