

Culture and Conflict

Conflict involves a perceived, latent, or manifest incompatibility, and culture influences the outbreak, perception, escalation, and resolution of conflict. By “culture” we mean the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and arts (Zimmermann, 2017). An individual’s unique upbringing and environment results in a culture that is inherently different from that of another, although one individual may be active in several cultures simultaneously. For example, Bouchra, co-author of this article, has the following cultural identities: mediator, Moroccan, North American resident, Muslim, peace-builder, peacemaker, volunteer, and so on.

The culture in which one is immersed influences one’s perception of conflict and effective conflict resolution. Hence, mediators must be mindful not only of their own dominant culture, but also of the disputants’ dominant culture so as to be able to see the conflict through their eyes.

Culture is an essential part of *conflict* resolution. Bouchra’s cultural identity illustrates this point. The society of Morocco, her birth country, is a high context culture¹. Relationships build slowly and trust-building takes time. In addition, a good reputation within one’s social group and the community grants a Moroccan high social capital. As a young girl growing up in Mohammadia, Bouchra watched trusted members of her small community mediate and resolve grievances. In disputes about a barking dog, a merchant-patron differences, trash, and so on, her elderly neighbours Jelali and Ramya were specifically sought as mediators. The pair recognized that strong relationships in a collectivist society were both social obligations and also fundamental to community safety and harmony. An apology was central to joint problem-solving and peacebuilding. Both excellent listeners, Jelali and Ramya directed each side to have their say before working to find thoughtful and creative mutual solutions. They stressed forgiveness of the offender by the offended and acceptance of the apology by the offender. They would often quip, “Allah esameh wa el mosameh Karim,” or “God forgives and who forgives is generous.” The opportunity to offer an apology and to be forgiven was and still is crucial to repair and reestablish relationships amongst disputants



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and within the community as a whole.

Bouchra’s mentors applied their subtle cultural values and practices to mediate disputes, with great success, and values and practices have influenced Bouchra. Even now, as a professionally trained mediator in North America, she still uses many of the skills she observed in Jelali and Ramya.

Jelali and Ramya were mediators in one small Moroccan community, but the conflict resolution expectations they encountered resembled those in the rest of the country. Although Morocco is a multi-ethnic society where differ-

ent groups have different cultural practices, the population is ninety-nine per cent Muslim, so there is a strong shared belief in the teachings of the Quran, including the hope of believers for a place in Jannah (paradise).

Unified by faith, different ethnicities in Morocco share the expectation that neighbours will resolve simple communal disputes. In general, people perceive themselves as very tolerant and striving to promote peace. Serving God is an essential part of daily life, and many believers base their perspectives regarding apology on the teachings of the Quran, wherein God asks *if you do not accept an apology and are unable to forgive whomever has done harm to you, how can you expect me to forgive you?* An apology is, therefore, highly valued and understood as the first step in healing for both offender and offended. According to Islamic principles, forgiveness is an obligation, a profound and essential ethical duty. Thus, in Moroccan society it is common to find an offender and a victim apologizing to each other. Apology is both fundamental and crucial for peacemaking, because it is woven into the social and cultural fabric. It is an essential ingredient of conflict resolution that prevents intractable conflicts within the various communities.

Adherence to the mediator(s) decision is also a Moroccan expectation, and violating such an expectation puts the offender at risk for being ostracized, an outcome far worse than any petty crime, simple dispute, or verdict. So, peacemakers like Jelali and Ramya ensure that conflicts can be resolved away from the court system.

Olatunji, the second co-author of this article, grew up in a Methodist and Roman Catholic household in Nigeria. Like Morocco, Nigeria is overall a high context culture. But with over two hundred and fifty ethnicities, marked differences exist between individual cultures. Even so, there is a common expectation among the different ethnicities that neighbours resolve simple communal disputes.

As a young boy in Lagos, Olatunji lived in a building that, like many in the city, housed people of varying ethnicities and faiths—Christianity, Islam, Native Religion, and so on. Barely a decade had passed since the Nigerian Civil War in which many of the neighbours fought on opposite sides or relocated to their specific ethnic areas. Former allies and enemies were now neighbours and, as such, were expected to resolve minor disputes. As a consequence of this expectation, minor disputes between neighbours rarely end in court even though Lagos is Africa's most populated megalopolis.

In contrast to Lagos, minor neighbour-neighbour disputes appear on court dockets in multicultural Canada and the USA, both of which are low-context cultures where relationships begin and end quickly and communication can be matter-of-fact. Disputants may be from high, low, and/or

mixed context cultures, and how they experience power and interpret conflict may differ. When neighbours disagree, such differences can escalate conflict. That is what happened in a dispute mediated by Olatunji between an African-American woman and two Chinese jewelry merchants in California.

The woman purchased a gold necklace two-and-half years earlier and believed it to be two carats more valuable than it was. The merchant recommended regular cleaning to prevent discoloration, and the buyer brought the necklace in for cleaning as scheduled. When the color began to fade, she approached the merchant about the problem. The merchant (North American-born son of Chinese parents) explained that the necklace discoloured because it was two carats less than the buyer believed it to be, and produced the store record as proof. He offered a swap of equal quality, but the buyer refused, accusing the seller of misrepresentation. The merchant in turn accused the buyer of trying to con the store.

The merchant's mother tried to intervene, and things escalated. Harsh words were exchanged, and the buyer—who bought her first piece of jewelry from the older merchant thirty years earlier—was asked to leave the store. Decades of goodwill evaporated.

Nine months after the incident, the parties found themselves in court. The buyer sued for the original pur-



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chase price, court fees, and pain and suffering. Her sister-in-law, a professional jewelry appraiser, came as support. Also in attendance were the junior merchant's wife and eldest son. In this particular court, a party may end mediation by requesting a trial.

At mediation the buyer spoke first. She justified her claim because she felt duped. Then the merchant's son spoke for his elderly mother, the original storeowner whose English was poor. He pointed out that the buyer wore the necklace for over two years, so her request was unfair. Pure gold is twenty-four carats. The buyer's necklace was fifty percent alloy, and even with two additional carats would still have discoloured. The merchant withdrew the offer of a swap because the buyer took the dispute to court, not to mention the fact that she had told his mother to mind "your f-ing Chinese business" when she tried to intervene. The younger Chinese merchant demanded that the buyer drop the case. His attitude almost ended the mediation, were it not for his mother's intervention, which calmed the nerves of not only her son, but also the African-American buyer and her sister-in-law.

Chinese culture tends to be characterized by "high power," meaning that a higher level of respect is paid to elders. Olatunji's Nigerian culture was also high power. Thus, he surmised that in the eyes of the Chinese mother, the

insult carried more weight than the financial aspects of the dispute. Olatunji hypothesized that unless the buyer apologized to the mother, a mutually satisfactory resolution would be impossible; the mother had been disrespected by someone younger than she, and such a slight would not be easily forgotten. Despite decades of interaction, the two women remained cultural strangers, and the African-American buyer did not appreciate that the older merchant would so take the insult to heart.

With that in mind, Olatunji requested to speak to the parties separately. The merchants were to step out of the room and wait down the hall, but he caught up with them in the hallway and, patting the son on the back, said, "Withdrawing the necklace swap is a power trip." Then he left quickly, before either merchant could respond. His intervention was based on the belief that people in negotiation are embroiled in psychological conflict—a Should I? Or Shouldn't I? (SISI) Dilemma—and that anyone can deem anything important or unimportant (Oniyaomebi, 2018). A bargaining position is thus a constructed reality that can be reversed. Olatunji also hoped that his negative opinion ("power trip") would cause the merchants to reverse their original stance. Even so, he still anticipated that an apology would be the deciding factor. As things transpired, it was.

In a private meeting with the buyer, Olatunji heard

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the buyer's sister-in-law acknowledge that hair-coloring products could discolor a gold necklace that wasn't pure gold. He also learned that the original purchase receipt recorded a dollar amount for the necklace but no carat number and that this was the merchant's usual practice. The buyer's sister-in-law agreed that this information moved the Chinese merchants into the driver's seat; in fact, she said, she'd attempted to make the buyer acknowledge that problem multiple times, with no effect.

At this point Olatunji asked the plaintiff whether apologizing to the merchant was a possibility, and she agreed to apologize—now fearing the worst. Even so, Olatunji recognized that the buyer would not have taken the conflict this far without a sense of real injustice.

For their part, the merchants knew that the purchase receipt was in their favor. In a private meeting, the son told Olatunji that in a "he-said, she-said" case, the buyer would likely lose. Appealing to the merchants' sense of fairness, Olatunji asked them to consider paying for the court cost and re-tabling their original offer of a necklace swap as a kind gesture. In return, the case could be dismissed without prejudice and the agreement could require the buyer to bring the jewelry in for regular cleaning. "We prefer to go to trial," the son replied.

Olatunji then politely informed the mother of a saying in his Yoruba language in Nigeria: *Eni t'óba fé télé tùtù, a dó mi si'iwaju, or someone that desires to walk on soft soil waters the ground.* He reminded her that a relationship going back three decades was worth preserving. Hence, he argued, his negotiation request was reasonable. Moreover, direct and indirect reciprocity would go a long way in their neighborhood (the buyer had intimated that many in the community eagerly awaited the court's outcome). "We prefer to see the judge!" the younger merchant cut in. But Olatunji knew that the mother would be the final decision-maker, so continued to appeal to her and mentioned that the buyer was willing to apologize. At this point, the mother interrupted her son and agreed to the terms, but only if the buyer would also promise to speak kindly of her and her son in the community.

A settlement agreement was signed, and the par-

ties engaged in friendly banter, leaving the courthouse together.

This case shows how an individual can be active in several cultures simultaneously. The American-born son of the Chinese merchant functioned under his mother's high power culture. Yet his tone was direct and his comments placed a higher premium on legal advantage, thus demonstrating the influence of Western culture. His Chinese mother, though a long-time resident of North America, expected unspoken words to be understood. Her Chinese culture influence her to value apology and reputation within the neighborhood more than legal advantage. The differing behaviors of the mother and son show that, even within the same family, cultural differences can affect the escalation, perception, and resolution of conflict. Thus, mediators need to be mindful of the cultures within which disputants are most active, particularly if the disputants identify with significantly different cultures.

It is tempting to attribute a minor court dispute between neighbours to a "sue-happy culture," but this particular conflict was interculturally complex. When the buyer first contacted the merchant about the necklace discoloration, their incompatible goals, emotions, and cultural differences meant a lost opportunity to defuse the conflict and prevent it from escalating. The buyer's final acceptance of the merchant's original offer demonstrates how the byproducts of cultural differences—stereotypes, prejudice, misconceptions, fundamental attribution errors², and negative emotion—can create blinders that precipitate and entrench conflict.

Had a trial decided the outcome, the African-American buyer would have likely lost everything, including the jewelry swap and court fees. However, even though victorious in court the Chinese merchants may have suffered the biggest loss if the buyer spread ill will about them in the community. Such a blow could have proved costly for them, a possibility that the mother was more aware of than was the son.

Thankfully, both sides "won" in this case, just as Jelali and Ramya preached in Morocco. 🏠

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1 A high-context culture relies on implicit communication and nonverbal cues, so messages cannot be understood without a great deal of background information. Asian, African, Arab, central European and Latin American cultures are generally considered to be high-context cultures. In contrast, a low-context culture relies on explicit communication so that more information is spelled out

and defined. Cultures with western-European roots, such as Australia, Canada, and the United States are generally considered to be low-context cultures.

2 The tendency to assume that a person's actions depend on what "kind" of person they are rather than on the social and environmental forces that influence them.