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Making Links while Building Bridges

Reflections from the SOMIC Project

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Introduction

The SOMIC (States of Mind in Conflict) project developed out of the *Arts in Peace Mediation* initiative. Hosted by Alexandre Fasel, the Swiss Ambassador to the United Kingdom, it started with conversations, some of which took the form of 'reflective practices'. Mediation practitioners were invited to the Swiss Embassy in London to engage in confidential conversations with a group of psychologists (and some arts practitioners) on challenges and opportunities of the process the respective mediator was working on (or had worked on in the past). These discussions led to the conclusion that the psychological aspect is a crucial element which is underestimated and often overlooked in peace mediation processes and therefore deserves deeper analysis.[1] Although a psychological approach is sometimes practised intuitively, psychological interventions have not been made explicit or properly studied and neither has their importance been recognised. In particular, the way mediation in highly escalated and violent conflicts is framed, theorised, and taught today does not sufficiently engage with the state of mind of the parties within the mediation process.

SOMIC sought to make explicit the psychological component of existing mediation practices and, specifically, to bring insights into the state of mind of all the participants in the mediation encounters. As an inductive and exploratory pilot, and as a starting point for evidence-based recommendations, it primarily aimed to map out what psychological input is needed, based on practitioners' experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers began the project with a deep dive into the relatively small body of existing literature that explores the intersection of peace mediation and psychology. They focused principally on academic journal searches, and policy reports and articles recommended by mediator friends of the project. Despite the particular formation of the researchers in psychosocial and psychoanalytic approaches to the human mind, 'psychology' was defined broadly at this stage, incorporating work from experimental and cognitive psychology paradigms and neuroscience.

In the early weeks of the project, the researchers and funders assembled an 'Advisory Board' for the project that consisted of three experts in peace mediation: a mediation scholar; a mediation support professional; and a frontline mediator. The Advisory Board met regularly to provide feedback on research findings and were crucial to facilitating the iterative methodology of the project.

The project received ethical approval from Birkbeck, University of London. Because of the disruption caused by Covid-19 restrictions all the data collection occurred remotely, which gave us the opportunity to interview mediators from around the world, and to bring together participants from diverse time zones and geographies. Although Europe was the major continent of origin, participants had experience of mediating across a range of geographies, with East Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Southern Africa especially well represented. The majority of participants were experienced in frontline mediation and had acquired their experience in high-level geopolitical peace mediation processes.[2]

The research consisted of three data-gathering phases: (1) Ten exploratory interviews with experienced mediators and mediation support professionals; (2) Two focus groups with a group of eight experienced frontline mediators; (3) Twenty-five 1-to-1 interviews with experienced mediators and mediation support professionals. These interviews were semi-structured in that they were structured around the research protocol while also following up on participant responses in order to generate new lines of enquiry.

SOMIC Findings and their Relevance for Arts in Peace Mediation

SOMIC's overarching research question to practitioners was: Based on your experience, how can psychology enhance mediation and peacebuilding practices? The SOMIC findings cannot be discussed in detail in this chapter.[3] In brief we found that participants' answers to this question tended to cluster around: (1) the psychology of parties in conflict; (2) the psychology of the mediator/s; (3) the mediation encounter, thus giving an indication of where psychological input is needed most urgently.

In terms of the parties in conflict, all mediator actors expressed a desire to gain a better psychological understanding of the states of mind of the parties, in particular the impact of trauma on the parties in conflict and on the quality of their participation in mediation processes. Trauma also emerged as a recurrent theme when discussing the psychology of mediators, in particular secondary trauma and its impact on the mediators' well-being.

In order to reflect on overlaps and synergies between the SOMIC findings and those from the *Arts in Peace Mediation* project, I will concentrate on the third of the SOMIC psychosocial sites – the mediation encounter – first, to elaborate on some of the key psychological dynamics of the encounter; and, second, to reflect on how the arts could be utilised to facilitate key psychological shifts within and between the mediation actors. In doing so, my approach is in line with a view of mediation as "a process which holds the relationships as central" (Abatis, 2021:22),[4] thus framing peace mediation practices as intersubjective relational encounters.

Against the backdrop of the synergies and overlaps identified in Chapter 1, *Arts in Peace Mediation: The Story So Far,* the final section of this chapter focuses on the themes of emotions in mediation, their management, and the key role played by 'space(s)' in mediation practices which were mentioned by mediation practitioners in both the *Arts in Peace Mediation* and *Psychology in Mediation* strands as being important in the practice of mediation and peacebuilding. I propose that, in order to enable psychology and the arts to make a meaningful contribution to peace mediation, it is necessary to articulate a contextualised, flexible and dynamic model of how the three domains – mediation practices, psychological insights and artistic activities – connect with and intersect with each other.

This necessitates a three-step process, not necessarily in the order below:

a. To home in on nodal points, blockages and desired shifts in the encounter dynamics, as identified by mediation and peacebuilding practitioners;

b. to analyse the psychological dynamics underpinning the blockages and nodal points, and why these dynamics and the proposed shifts are important for and beneficial to the mediation process;
c. to identify specific artistic interventions and at what point of the process they could be introduced most fruitfully to initiate and/or support the desired shifts and dynamics in the mediation.

Emotions, Spaces and 'The Third'

In some of the discussions (as summarised in Chapter 1) participants stated that "both art and psychology create space" and that "both art and psychology create the conditions for working in liminal spaces". What exactly do we mean by that? Why is it important to 'create space'? How can we understand the nature and function of such 'space(s)'?

In the SOMIC interviews mediation actors often spoke of the beneficial impact of 'safe spaces' when referring to encounters between parties – spontaneous conversations, coffee breaks etc. – that take place outside the formal settings, thus suggesting that the physical stepping out of the constraining formality of mediation settings enables a different and creative quality of exchange. Similarly, safety and safe spaces have also been referred to by artists as being important. However, beyond the direct reference to locality, what 'safe' means psychologically and why it matters is not articulated or explored by either group but, rather assumed as a shared, and taken for granted, understanding of its meaning.

If we consider feeling threatened and anxious as the opposite of feeling safe, we can begin to appreciate the different states of mind that feeling threatened and feeling safe engender. In the first case, we have an embattled state of mind, characterised by polarised and rigid thinking, and pushing individuals to resort to primitive defence mechanisms such as splitting[5] and projection to maintain a modicum of safety. In the context of parties who have been deadly enemies, these responses are based on real experience. In the battleground of positions, hurts, resentments, and clashing worldviews, it feels as if there is only space for 'either-or', 'my experience or your experience'.

Psychologically safe spaces enable an in-between or liminal space in which, metaphorically speaking, there is 'room to breathe' (and to think) in intersubjective encounters flooded with difficult and intense emotions. The Relational Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin conceptualises this 'third space'[6] as an intersubjective mental space co-created by both subjects, which hinges on the ability to surrender, that is, allow oneself a certain letting-go of the self, adopt the view of the other, and perceive things from his or her perspective. It's hard to empathise with one's enemy, to 'walk in their shoes', but a third space allows parties to "enter actively into another individuality, another perspective on the world – without losing sight even momentarily on one's unique perspective, one's own 'surplus' of life experience, one's own sense of self" (Valentino, 2005:5).[7]

I have argued elsewhere (Seu, 2021)[8] that mediators and peacebuilding actors have the potential to act as 'the moral third', by being deeply involved in the psychological dimensions of mediation while resisting being pulled into either of the polarised positions and, instead, facilitating and modelling a 'third space' where truths and experiences from both parties can be validated and coexist. This third position/space brings something new by introducing possibilities which are otherwise unconceivable to the polarised and embattled minds of parties in conflict. The role of the moral third is to withstand the ambivalence – the need for, and simultaneous resistance to, a new encounter – to foster the encounter as a safe space, and to reflect back the hope for, if not the possibility of, a different way of being and coexisting with others (Seu, 2021:10).

However, despite the involved role of mediators and other peacebuilding actors, positions can sometimes be too entrenched, minds too polarised and emotions too raw, and new possibilities might feel too threatening. This is where the arts can contribute to and bolster mediators' function as 'the moral third', by creating a 'third space' that speaks to each party but does not belong exclusively to either. The essence of this dynamic was captured by a participant to the *Arts in Peace Mediation* webinar: "Making arts is a physical process of imagining and shaping possibility".[9]

Trauma blocks and distorts access to imagination because the traumatic past is still too real and intrudes into the present. When fear and trauma dominate minds, it is hard to imagine a more hopeful and benign future. Again, this was commented on in the SOMIC interviews – in terms of the need for mediators to have the psychological knowledge and skills to support parties in conflict to shift their rigid mindset – and in the *Arts in Peace Mediation* webinars, "Artwork actions the premise that imagination can transform despair into hope and agency, and art can offer critical and meaningful readings of the world and possible futures".[10]

Mirroring this statement, SOMIC participants also identified their psychological role in bringing hope and conveying that, however unthinkable at any given moment, it is possible to get through the ostensibly insurmountable obstacles in peacebuilding. In this vein, one of the mediators we interviewed likened their role to that of a doctor: "You are psychologically approaching it (mediation) as a doctor (who) wants to try to reduce the pain, prolong the life, give hope".

"Safe spaces" within mediation, as advocated by Rifkind and Yawanarajah (2019),[11] play a crucial role in facilitating the creation of a 'third space', by enabling conflict parties to explore their feelings, internal narratives, and personal motives. I would add that a key element of that psychological and emotional safety is that they enable the imagining of a different way of being with the other, without fully letting go of the past. The third space psychologically holds both past and imagined futures; and does not do away with the tension but harnesses it creatively. Thus, in the new 'in-between' third space minds and emotions can expand, actors can experience themselves and others differently, and for the first time encounter the former enemy as a human being. The psychological fluidity and expansiveness of the 'third space' can, however briefly, bring hope and release from harrowing pasts and pressing traumas and be the first step in the difficult road to reconciliation.

It is clear from the above that an additional and different understanding of mediation encounters is necessary to begin to identify the psychological tools required for the creation of a

'third space' and to manage the powerful emotional charge in peace mediations. Many of the practitioners we interviewed wished for a shift in how emotions are understood and dealt with in mediation practices and lamented the lack of psychological knowledge in mediation trainings on how to understand and deal with emotions. They argued that not only are emotions in mediation processes unavoidable, they should also be recognised as a potential force to move the process forward, rather than an obstacle to be overcome. This is because, as one mediator put it: "(it is not) the personality that drives his agenda because there's these emotions that are driving (him). What do we do with it? And can we deal with it?"

Referring to the arts, a peace mediator practitioner said "During the meetings, the artists can help calm emotions, they can restore calm to the discussion, they can build bridges among participants".[12] Psychology can help us understand how this 'calming' function happens and why it helps 'build bridges'. The psychoanalytic concepts of 'psychic containment' and 'mentalisation' seem particularly important in this context (see Seu, 2021 for a review).

Mentalisation is the capacity to distinguish and understand mental states in oneself and others. The role played by emotion regulation in cognition and behaviour has long been recognised by psychoanalysis and psychiatry as a key function of mentalisation and reflective capacities. The discovery of the mirror neurons as well as research into early imitation, which sets in immediately after birth, have boosted the opinion that intersubjectivity is an innate capability and is facilitated by mentalisation, which, in turn, is a component of a more general psychological capacity called reflective functioning. Reflective functioning is important during interpersonal conflict and, consequently, for mediation because "conflict – or, rather, its adaptive resolution – prototypically calls for the perception of the self and of the other in relation to the self",[13] "requiring individuals to reconcile their own legitimate claims with concern for the other".[14] I have argued (Seu, 2021) that mediation has the potential to mobilise that innate capability for intersubjectivity and to move the parties in conflict away from their rigid and polarised position towards a new experience of encountering

the other, and themselves, anew. The mediators' capacity to hold, that is, to be aware of and tolerate particular emotional states without turning to action or repressing them, and their ability to contain emotions in the process are key. Similar to the mediator's function, which can be modelled and internalised, the arts can also contribute to the containment of emotions by, for example, giving expression to affects that cannot be articulated through words. They can provide a useful canvas – literal and metaphorical – onto which to project, make visible, and then process raw affects. Arguably, the safety in artistic production comes from it happening in a space that reflects everyday life but is also "separated from it by a frame, the edge of a stage, by playing a 'role'".[15] The liminal quality of the performance – real, but not reality – offers a transitional 'third space' in which emotions can be experienced safely, thus psychologically contained.

Summary

I have attempted to illustrate, through a focus on emotional regulation and the use of 'third space', how the arts can potentially be beneficially employed to facilitate important psychological shifts in peace mediation processes. It also exemplifies how, in order to provide targeted recommendations and interventions, we need to articulate more specifically what the desired psychological shifts are in any given mediation process, to then identify the most appropriate form of artistic intervention and its timing. To achieve that, we need to gain more grounded knowledge of real-life peace mediation interventions with a focus on desired psychological and strategic shifts and/or blockages.

What I have proposed in this chapter is only one of the many possible ways in which the creative potential of an in-depth collaboration between the arts and psychology can be developed to enhance the practice and effectiveness of peace mediation. Despite the obvious overlaps and synergies between the arts and psychology, however, we are left with many questions on how a collaboration between the two fields could be built to offer concrete and effective contributions to peace mediation processes. From my perspective as a psychological practitioner,

the most urgent to be tackled involves the development of a grounded contextual model to articulate the crucial interlinking of the 'what' (the specific focus/challenge in a mediation process) and the 'why' (how can we understand this challenge psychologically) with the 'how' (how can the arts make an intervention in that context). That is, a grounded identification of shifts, changes, and dynamics in mediation settings needing intervention, accompanied by an analysis of their psychological underpinnings and function, to arrive at a targeted application of the arts to impact and shift the identified dynamics and blockages.

Like cogs in a mechanism, it is the interlinking, rather than the order in which these questions might be answered that matters and, indeed, the movement has to be dynamic and fluid for it to adapt to the complex and ever-changing dynamics of peace mediation.

NOTES

1 At this point the term 'psychology' is used to encompass a variety of approaches to the human mind and behaviour, leaving aside, for the moment, the fundamental and important epistemological differences between the various branches of psychology – e.g. psychonalysis/psychodynamics, neuropsychology, social and group psychology, developmental psychology and so on.
2 For further information about the project's methodology and findings please refer to the *Final Report* https://www.bbk.ac.uk/research/centres/embedding-human-rights
3 Please refer to the *Final Report* for further information.
4 Abatis, K. (2021) *Inviting the Elephant into the Room: Culturally Oriented Mediation and Peace Practices.* Centre for Security Studies, ETH: Zurich.
5 I am referring to the splitting of the mind when experiencing trauma, and the splitting of the Other into either good or bad.
6 Benjamin, J. (2017) *Beyond Doer and Done to: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third.* London: Routledge.
7 Valentino, R. S. (2005). *The Oxymoron of Empathic Criticism.* Poroi, 4 (1), 5.
8 Seu, I. B. (2021) *States of Mind in Conflict: Offerings and Translations from the Psychoanalytic and Psychosocial Fields.* The New England Journal of Public Policy.
9 Oral communication, webinar on *Arts in Peace Mediation,* 6.10.2021.
10 Oral communication, webinar on *Arts in Peace Mediation,* 6.10.2021.
11 Gabrielle Rifkind and Nita Yawanarajah, *Preparing the Psychological Space for Peacemaking*, New England Journal of Public Policy 31, no.1 (2019), art.7
12 Oral communication, webinar on *Arts in Peace Mediation,* 5.5.2021.
13 Werner Bohleber (2013). *The Concept of Intersubjectivity in Psychoanalysis: Taking Critical Stock,* International Journal of Psychoanalysis 94, no.4:800
14 Peter Fonagy, Gyorgy Gergely, Elliott L. Jurist, and Mary Target (2004). *Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self,* London: Karnc, 3–23
15 Dagmar Reichert, personal communication

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