Explorative Mediation at Work: The Importance of Dialogue for Mediation Practice
Roger Seaman (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

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In a remarkable 1997 footnote on mediation’s institutionalisation, John Lande claimed that ‘intellectual entrepreneurs’ periodically challenge taken-for-granted ideas through ‘bursts of ideological activism in which ideologies compete for dominance’ (Lande 1997:854, n.62). In Lande’s sights were Bush and Folger’s (1994) transformative mediation model. Today he might have added Winslade and Monk’s (2001) ‘Narrative Mediation’, and Picard and Melchin’s (2007) ‘Insight Mediation’. These models share a flare for prescription: their critique of things as they are underpins their vision of how things should be (or could be).

Roger Seaman’s *Explorative Mediation at Work* appears to straddle both categories. Its title and length (260 pages) suggest the former. It shares much, however, with the latter descriptive approach, reviewing literature, reporting empirical research and speculatively theorising. The section describing explorative mediation is brief and tentative, and the model so close to transformative mediation that it could almost be a subset: ‘transformative/explorative’ perhaps. Yet the philosophical foundations on which Seaman builds are closer to narrative mediation, particularly its anti-essentialism and social constructionism.

The book’s origins as a doctoral thesis are evident in the structure: Chapters 2–4 review the subjects of mediation, employee relations, organisational justice and dialogue. Chapters 5 and 6 contain case studies labelled ‘Instrumental Mediation’ and ‘Relational Mediation’. Chapter 7 describes explorative mediation, and Chapter 8 concludes that it is a ‘Democratic and Dialogic Intervention in the Workplace’ (p. 245).

Its primary purpose could be described as problematising neutrality. It highlights a contradiction inherent in workplace mediation, where those selecting and paying mediators are not those taking part in the mediation. Seaman notices the inherent trickiness of accepting an organisation’s money while protesting indifference to its agenda: ‘the paid mediator will always feel a sense of obligation to the commissioner’ (p. 230). He worries that mediators will ‘knowingly or unwittingly’ use their power to further that agenda (p. 7), sharing Bush and Folger’s tendency to set up a straw man of the directive mediator who ‘manipulate[s] parties towards a resolution’ (p. 39). Mediator power can have an up-side, however: ‘the authority of the mediator may paradoxically enable usual relationships of power to be momentarily suspended’ (p. 53).

The book is deeply philosophical. From Kant comes the suggestion that, while mediators may appear to treat humans as ends in themselves, the very nature of human resource function (which mediators help deliver) is to treat them as means. Bohm, Plato and Gergen underpin the notion of mediation as dialogue. The critique of hegemonic power is rooted in Marxian theory and Foucault. And here lies a difficulty. While making a common-sense argument that mediators have more power than their ideology of neutrality acknowledges, the language of contemporary philosophy can obscure rather than clarify. To give one example: ‘mediators … may seek to enact for themselves a resolution of two contradictory impulses, in which they both strive, in dialogical
exchange, for a self-knowledge of no-self and also actively reflect upon contrasting and competing discourses (i.e., recursive representations of power) …’ (p. 83).

The empirical element consists of two extended case studies where professional mediators role-played mediations with actors. Video extracts are examined using ‘critical discourse analysis’ and ‘political discourse analysis’ to get at the ‘ideological and political nature of the practice of workplace mediation’ (p. 95). Chapter 5 shows a fairly standard facilitative approach, dubbed ‘instrumental’ because such mediators apparently lack awareness of their power to influence outcomes (p. 90). The transcripts show mediators expressing opinions and acting in fairly authoritative fashion; Seaman views them as ‘trap[ped] … within a discourse of business’ (p. 135). For a counterpoint to the allegedly judgemental qualities of facilitative mediation he turns to transformative mediation, featured in the second case study, with its injunction that mediators follow, rather than lead, the parties. The snag here is that such passivity seems less likely to challenge the allegedly hegemonic nature of contemporary employment. How can mediators achieve more, such as resisting hegemony or creating ‘micro-emancipation’ (p. 74), while doing less?

Throughout the book transformative mediation is critiqued as apolitical and insufficiently attentive to power. Here lies the key to the explorative model. While adopting many transformative moves it diverges in seeking to open up conversation about the wider political and organisational context. The mediator would ‘hold a mirror to the conflict for the parties to look at’ although Seaman extends the metaphor, suggesting a ‘hologram’ of the conflict’s ‘multi-dimensionality’ (p. 225). Power, oppression and injustice could all be on the agenda.

This seems rather a courageous tack for workplace mediators. How would they explain to a commissioning human resource manager that they intend to open up space for dialogue about hegemonic power and organisational oppression? If they did, would they get the work? I found much to like in this idealistic essay, particularly its acknowledgement of workplace mediation’s political nature, but fear explorative mediation will require considerably more detail to enter the mediation canon alongside the transformative or narrative variety.
References


