

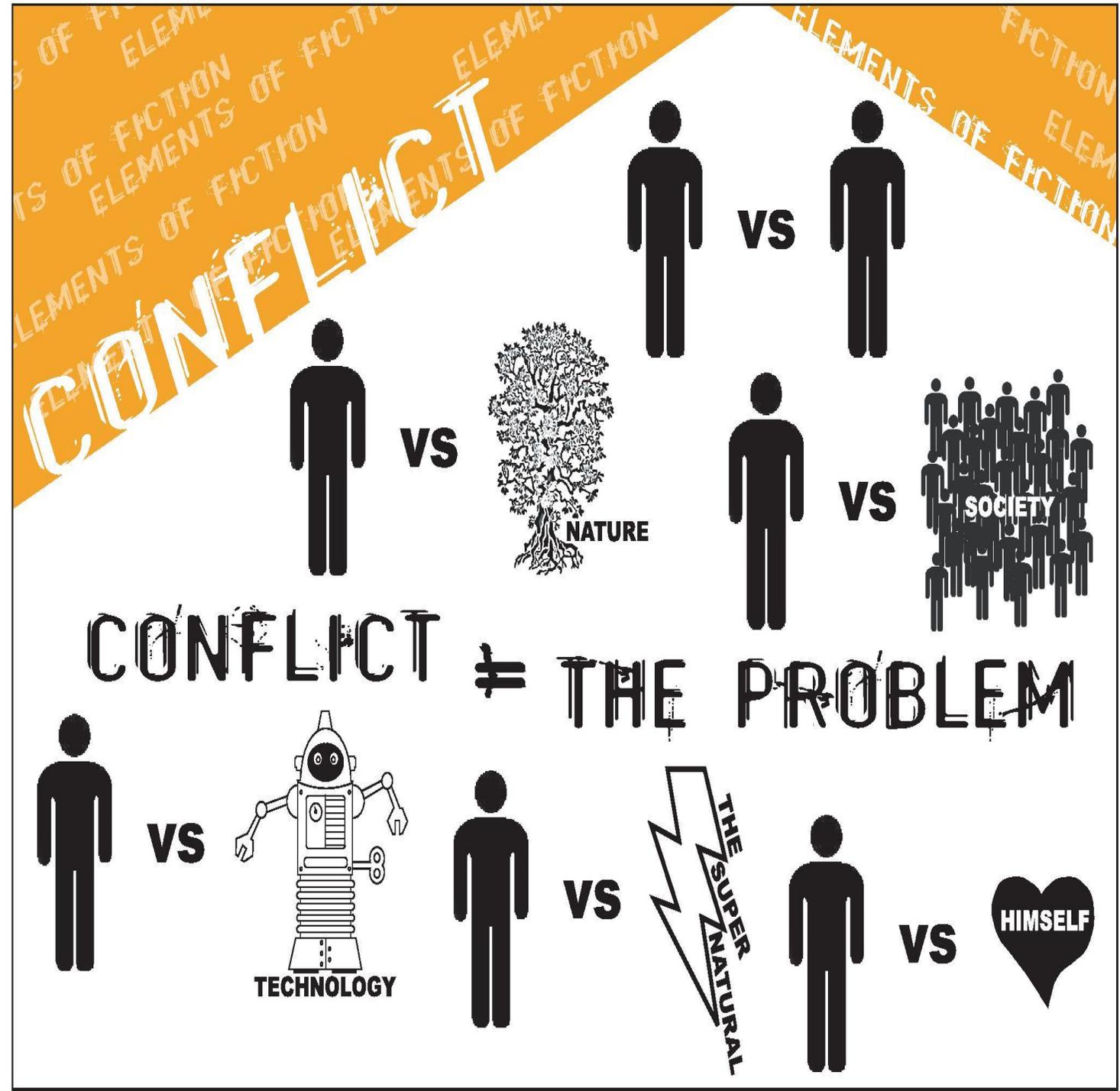
Effective Conflict Management Tools and Techniques

Reducing conflict through an increased understanding of the nature of conflict, improved communication and collaboration.

What is Conflict?

Conflict most commonly refers to:

- the general behavioural patterns of individuals or groups in dispute over disparate perspectives and ideas,
- social conflict, i.e. the struggle for agency, status, power or resources in society,
- Cognitive dissonance (internal conflict) happens when individuals experience contradictory opinions, theories or attitudes simultaneously
- war, often known as armed conflict,
- fighting (fist fighting/brawling) - an attempt to perpetuate harmful contact upon another person.



Types of Conflict

- Intrapersonal – Occurs within oneself, also known as cognitive dissonance.
- Interpersonal – Relates to conflict between people (individuals or groups).
- Family conflict – Conflict within or between families; tendency to be acrimonious and protracted.
- Workplace conflict – Workers are often under stress and have conflicting needs, goals, values and inhibitions, thus workplaces tend to be high conflict environments.
- Role conflict – Arises when an individual plays or is expected to play multiple incompatible roles, often simultaneously.
- Ethnic conflict – dispute between two or more ethnic groups wherein group identity forms the basis of the conflict.
- International conflict – Dispute between two or more countries wherein national interests form the basis of conflict.
- Conflict of interest - A situation in which a person or entity has multiple interests or obligations, one of which could interfere with the ethical decision-making of that individual or entity.
- Environmental conflict - Human conflict involving natural disasters, natural resources, and/or public property.

Conflict and Human Behaviour

Humans engage many means to reduce potentially harmful or unwelcome stimuli. These include tangible constructs such as laws, police enforcement, weapons and physical barriers, and range to include physiological reactions (i.e. fight or flight response, defence mechanisms) and unconscious psychological methods, wherein one searches for causal patterns in their environment without being overwhelmed by mechanistic details of any particular stimulus. We are prone, when tracking these causal patterns to interpret and manipulate details in order to get the results we want, to reduce anxiety and to retain/strengthen personal identity.

Understanding Conflict

- Cognitive Psychology is the study of mental processes such as attention, memory, perception, linguistics, creativity and problem solving, and attempts to establish general principals to understand how humans perceive, acquire and maintain meaning in an apparently chaotic world. The central tenant of many Cognitive Psychology theories is that the mind forms a uniform whole through systemizing tendencies (structuralism).
- Binary opposition is an important concept of structuralism, which projects functional binaries into almost all language and thought. Binary opposition is the most basic systemizing tendency, in which two hypothetical opposites are defined by and opposed to each other. In structuralism, a binary opposition is seen as a fundamental organizer of human thought, culture, and language. Right/wrong, good/bad, black/white, true/false, tall/short...

Egocentrism is the inability to differentiate between subjective schemas and objective reality; in other words an inability to understand or assume any perspective other than one's own.

“Whatever we think of as ‘self’ we will protect and maintain. If it is a conceptual self, and likely it is, then we end up with mind protecting mind. This creates a rather introverted self mind, creating thoughts and perceptions in its own image. When self becomes confused with mind, and mind becomes seen as the self, one's self serving activities end up creating an experience of reality that is entirely self-referential.”

-excerpt from, *The Book of Not Knowing: Exploring the True Nature of Self, Mind and Consciousness* - by Peter Ralston

Imaginary audience – a psychological state where an individual (incorrectly) thinks that other people are watching him/her with interest. This state is more prevalent with children and adolescents, although age is not a predictive or limiting factor.

Common Components of Conflict:

- **Miscommunication** – A common cause of conflict, ineffective communication can exacerbate situations and often creates an environment of mistrust and hostility.
- **Bias** – a predisposition to a partial perspective that refuses to consider the possible merits of alternative points of view.
- **Competition** – in an environment of limited resources, competition for these resources will likely lead to conflict on many levels.
- **Favoritism**, which refers to partiality based upon inclusion in a favored group, rather than merit. Nepotism refers to partiality to family whereas cronyism refers to partiality to an associate or friend.
- **Inconsistency/Unpredictability** – human beings seek psychological/social consistency and tend to project spurious causal relationships to function optimally in the real world.
- **Diversity** – Different cultural, ethnic, familial and individual identities and beliefs are often a basis for conflict.
- **Perspective/perception** – A point of view informed by physiology, life experiences and environment. Everyone has their own perspective and conflict is often caused by differing personal views.
- **Identity** – Is a collection of beliefs about oneself that includes elements such as intelligence, gender, sexuality, ethnic/cultural background and experiences. Threats to identity abound in society.
- **Proselytization** – Attempts to convert a person or people to one's own point of view/beliefs.
- **Accident/naivety** – Sometimes one or even both parties involved in conflict are not aware that their actions will cause conflict.
- **Stress** – Negative stressors result in negative behaviours (Strain Theory)

Understanding Bias

- Bias is a predisposition to hold or believe one's subjective perspective as 'truth' and to disregard the merits of alternative perspectives. Biases are learned through cultural contexts, heuristics and mirroring. Many biases exist throughout the world and can be utilized (consciously or implicitly) to buffer or rescind an individual, an ethnic group, a nation, a religion, a social class, a political party, theories, philosophies, or locations. Bias occurs in all individuals, comes in many forms and is closely related to stereotypes and prejudice.

Types of Bias (incomplete list)

Favoritism - an in-group bias defined by a pattern of favoring members of one's in-group over out-group members, e.g. nepotism.

Apophenia - a tendency to perceive causal relationships within random data (related to magical thinking/beliefs not rationally justifiable to an observer outside the belief system).

Confirmation bias - the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one's beliefs while disregarding information that contradicts it.

Attribution - when individuals tend to assume the actions of others are the result of personal factors, whereas they tend to assume their own actions arise from external stimuli or circumstance.

Status Quo - The current standard is taken as a reference point, and any change from that standard is perceived as detrimental.

Self-serving bias - the tendency for cognitive processes to be distorted by the individual's need to maintain and enhance their own self-esteem.

Experimenter bias - occurs in scientific research when experimenter expectations regarding subject matter studied skews results, altering the outcome of the experiment.

Inductive bias – a reliance upon previously successful algorithms or templates to predict output when given input that has not been encountered before.

Cognitive Frames and Framing

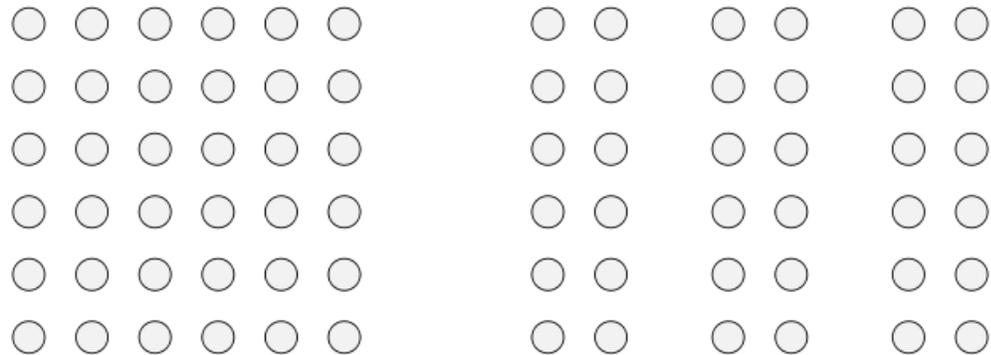
Socio-cultural constructs such as language, religion and stratification (social status) inform one's cognitive frame considerably, as do physiological and environmental factors. Each individual engages their cognitive and communicative frames, which are informed by their own standards, morals, attitudes, values, and experiences. Cognitive and behavioural frames significantly affect the intractability of conflict because different people often conceive mutually incompatible interpretations of events.

Serial, binary and associative tendencies

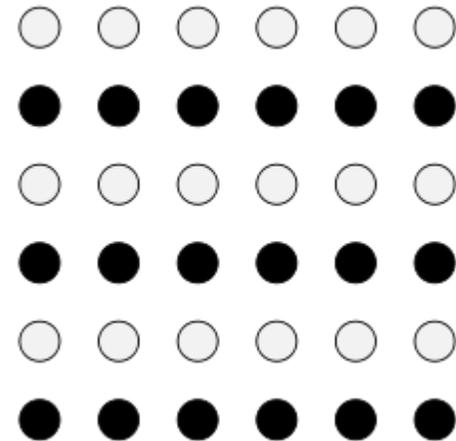
- Conceptually, conflict is closely connected to binaries and is bi-directional. The closely related concept of inversion in Subaltern studies refers to a discursive strategy which opposes or resists a dominant discourse by reversing its categories and re-enacting an asymmetrical relationship with the terms/roles reversed. Inversion in a social context is defined by strong binaries and a collective desire for retribution. For example: A reversal of the colonizer's monopoly on violence is linked to power and seen as necessary to break the 'master-slave' dialect, as happened in the French Revolution or Post-colonial India.

Gestalt Grouping Laws:

The Law of Proximity states that one observes objects that are close to each other as forming a group.

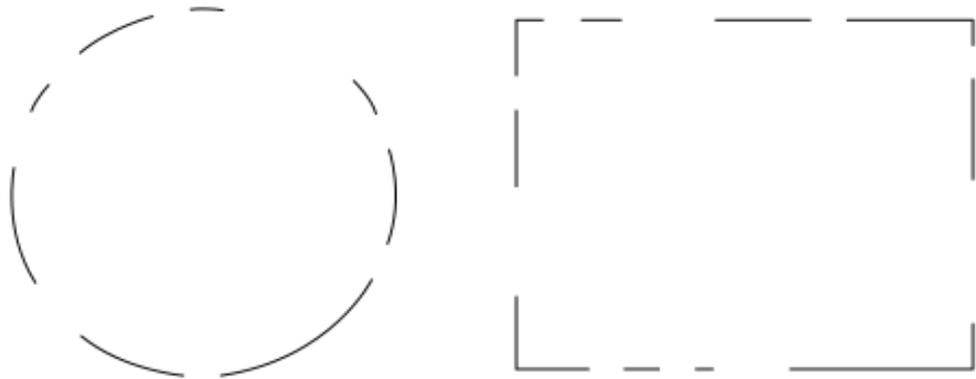


The Law of Similarity similarly states that elements within an assortment of objects are perceptually grouped together if they are similar to each other.



Grouping Laws continued:

- Law of Closure—The law of closure states that individuals perceive objects such as shapes, letters, pictures, etc., even when the images are not complete. In other words, when parts of a whole picture are missing, our perception fills in the visual gaps.



- Law of Symmetry (Also known as the Symmetry Heuristic)— states that the mind perceives objects as being symmetrical and forming around a center point. It is perceptually pleasing to divide objects into an even number of symmetrical parts. Therefore, when two symmetrical elements are unconnected the mind perceptually connects them to form a complimentary, coherent shape.



Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination

In Cognitive Psychology, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are understood as related but disparate concepts. In popular media stereotypes are often mislabeled and portrayed in a negative way in which they are naively confused with prejudice and discrimination. This percept suggests that stereotypes are bad in that they are the result of poor parenting, lack of education, and inadequate mental/emotional development, although this is not the case.

Systemic Barriers to Effective Communication Within and Between Communities

- The human brain is wired to utilize reductionist, systematizing principles in an attempt to organize and understand sensory input, and to create meaning in an apparently chaotic world.
- Individual and collective in-group bias against 'outsiders'.
- Cultural, national and ethnic Imperialism, which endorse hegemony (when the ruling class can manipulate the value system and mores of a society, so that their view becomes the standard).
- Power imbalances (i.e. Marginalization, inequality and inequity) are inherent in all societies.
- Conditioning - corporate greed drives incentivized behaviour in citizens using Game Theory.
- Victim blaming and learned helplessness contribute to the marginalization of subalterns.
- Failure to take ownership of conflict and to view it as a public opportunity to resolve disputes, take restorative measures and encourage co-operation.
- A generalized, self-perpetuating cycle of fear, greed and delusional hyper-consumerism.
- The Industrial food system and the commodification of food upsets traditional values of sharing and community, creating an environment of constant competition for staple necessities.

How to address systemic barriers to Communication and Collaboration:

- Be a personally and socially conscious communicator i.e. be present, focussed, and responsive.
- Be an advocate of Theory of Mind (ToM): the ability to recognize and attribute mental states—beliefs, motives, opinions, needs, theories, etc.—to oneself and others, and to understand that even though another’s beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives are different from one's own, they are equally valid (even if they are not logical).
- Be a role model for change by validating yourself and others around you.
- Create critical, involved clients through access to information, education and engagement.
- Endorse and participate in tribunal processes during family and civil conflict.
- Practice Inductive Reasoning (probability), avoid Abductive (inferential) and Deductive Reasoning (indisputable).
- Practice co-regulation with your clients and work to promote and teach self regulation.
- Do not avoid conflict, use it as an edifying opportunity to grow and reinforce what we have learned.

Tools to Improve Communication

To effectively mediate and resolve conflict, open lines of communication are essential. To achieve effective communication:

- Greet the client professionally with open body language and in a serious, yet considerate manner.
- Establish working ground rules that define behavioural expectations and boundaries (i.e. no yelling, swearing or sarcasm when parties are in session).
- Develop your own integrated understanding of the clients and their conflict through reciprocal conversations with both parties.
- Identify needs that are related to/affected by the conflict, and list existing and potential barriers to meeting those needs.
- Identify, prioritize and work to reduce potential stressors - both in and out of sessions - for all parties involved.
- Work with both parties independently to identify and acknowledge the root causes of conflict.
- Help the clients understand and acknowledge the value of and need to compromise.
- Identify possible lifestyle changes and preventative programming that would serve to reduce the probability of future conflict.
- Work with the parties independently to develop a list of desired outcomes. Then ask each of the parties to prioritize their own list from most critical to least.

Co-regulation

If emotion co-regulation is in effect, the result will be a decrease in overall emotional distress. A working definition of emotion co-regulation has been offered as "a bidirectional linkage of oscillating emotional channels between partners, which contributes to emotional stability for both partners".

Examples of Co-regulating behaviors to defuse stressful situations:

- **Prompting:** Physically prompt and facilitate a relaxed response by remaining calm and focussed.
- **Facilitating:** Encourage and vocally prompt communication from/for the client.
- **Respecting:** Listen to and validate the client's lead: be sensitive to the client's interests and encourage their explanation.
- **Redirecting attention:** Use intentional distractions and redirections to draw the client's attention away from negative stimuli; a short walk and talk can be very effective.
- **Reassurance:** Actively reassure and encourage the client that something can be done to manage their conflict, however WE must deal with the situation responsibly.
- **Emotional understanding:** Show understanding and reflection; elaborate upon the client's distress or preoccupation
- **Physical comforting:** Gestures or behaviors to comfort client (e.g., hand on their shoulder, eye contact, nodding your head).
- **Vocal comforting:** Initiate vocalizations to comfort the client (e.g., sshhing, singing, a soft slow voice).
- **Inclusivity:** Avoid excessive use of exclusive language "I, me, you, your, they"; instead use inclusive terms "we, us, our, together" whenever viable.

Contracts – especially written ones - clearly set out the details of the accord and are useful tools in positively transforming relations between parties in conflict. Contracts can be legally binding when desired.

Benefits of a Written Contract

A written contract can:

- provide proof of what transpired between parties,
- help prevent misunderstandings by clearly establishing definitions and parameters from the outset,
- give both parties security and peace of mind by having a physical copy of the contract,
- clarify individual status and the nature of the relationship between parties,
- reduce the risk of future conflict by detailing boundaries, timeframes, costs, and delineating (un)acceptable behaviour,
- prescribe how future disagreements or conflicts will be resolved,
- describe how the contract can be amended and list remedies for breach of contract,
- specify under what circumstances either party can terminate the contract.

The principles of social psychology (ABCs: affect, behavior, and cognition) apply to the study of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, and psychologists have expended substantial research efforts studying these concepts. **Recent** collaborations between Cognitive and Social Psychology studies identify the unconscious component in our perceptions is the stereotype. We may decide that “French people are romantic”, that “old people are sociable”, or that “college professors are brilliant”, and we may reference these beliefs to guide our actions toward people from those groups. Once the stereotype has formed, the affective component – prejudice – may attach conditions of worth and opinions that one holds about the characteristics of a social group onto the individual in question. Our prejudices can be problematic because they often lead to discrimination - unjustified negative behaviors toward members of outgroups based on their group membership. Prejudice embodies the affective element of stereotyping (where emotive connotations are added to a stereotype), whereas discrimination entails behavioral components and actions.

Stereotypes

In Cognitive Psychology, stereotypes are understood to be primarily a cognitive organizational process, which occurs unconsciously and is necessary to make sense of and survive in the world. Principles of categorization involved in stereotyping unconsciously utilize probability and labelling theory to classify nouns (people, places, things or objects), and function primarily to simplify and systematize sensory information so that our environment is more readily identified, recalled, predicted, and reacted to. Between stereotypes, objects, people and places are considered to be as disparate from each other as possible, whereas within stereotypes, objects, people and places are labelled as similar to each other as possible.

Stereotypes continued...

Once stereotypes have formed, there are two main aspects that explain their persistence. Primarily, the cognitive effects of schematic processing make it so that when members of a group behave as we expect, their behavior confirms and reinforces existing stereotypes. Furthermore, logical arguments against stereotyping have been shown to be futile in countering the influence of emotional response, which often countermands logical thought. Because stereotypes function to codify and validate social reality, they exercise tremendous influence over how people perceive and deal with themselves and others. As a result, stereotypes can lead to discrimination and prejudice, although these terms should not be used as equivalents or substitutions.

Conflict Management – A Summary.

Once parties are in conflict and have agreed to enlist a neutral third party to help manage and settle the dispute, they may request the services of a mediator. A mediator will then meet with both parties – separately, and when required, together - in an attempt to facilitate a mutual agreement. Mediators facilitate accords by:

- choosing a neutral, comfortable, low stress environment in which to meet with clients,
- educating parties on the nature of conflict, which enables them to take ownership of their role(s) in the conflict,
- facilitating, monitoring and directing constructive communication amongst parties,
- encouraging all parties to engage in shared, mutually acceptable compromises,
- assisting parties in exploring options and potential solutions,
- contributing professional, reliable and effective schemas to reduce conflict,
- facilitating an environment and mood conducive to collaborative problem solving.

Cultural Sensitivity and Understanding – opening oneself to other cultures and ways of thinking is almost certain to facilitate understanding, acceptance and growth in all cultures and people. Explore the ideas and stories of other cultures and be an active learner and participant whenever possible. What you learn will be valuable in helping you connect with future clients.

Anekāntavāda – a Jainist doctrine that claims that the ultimate truth/reality is complex and has countless facets. No theory or statement can describe the nature of truth/reality. Other beings and their statements about ‘truth’ are incomplete, and at best represent a partial reality.

A drop of rain trickled from a cloud into the ocean. When it beheld the breadth of its waters it was utterly confounded: “What a place is this sea, and what am I? If this exists I am non-existent.” While it was thus regarding itself with the eye of contempt, an oyster received and cherished the drop in its bosom. Fortune preferred it to a place of honour; for the drop became a renowned Royal Pearl. Because it was humble, the raindrop found exaltation: it knocked at the door of Nonentity and thus, arose into being.

- From *The Bustan*, by Saadi Shirazi (Persian poet, 1210-1292).

List of References and Suggested Readings

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Brain Mechanisms and Behaviour -

Clinical Neuroscience -

Metacognition,

Mediator's Handbook