

Bercovitch, Jacob, ed. Resolving International Conflicts: The theory and practice of mediation. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996.

David Last

Volume 17, numéro 1, spring 1997

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs17_01br01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Last, D. (1997). Compte rendu de [Bercovitch, Jacob, ed. Resolving International Conflicts: The theory and practice of mediation. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 17(1), 159–161.

Bercovitch, Jacob, ed. *Resolving International Conflicts: The theory and practice of mediation*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996.

A week after receiving this book for review I found myself on a road in Bosnia between Muslim and Serb crowds, each of several thousand people. Accompanied by a platoon of Czech soldiers in armored vehicles, I spent the next seven hours mediating between the leaders of the two crowds to prevent a violent clash. In April and May 1996, officers of NATO's Implementation Force (IFOR) and civilians with the UN and European Community missions repeatedly negotiated and mediated to avoid violent confrontations in the lead-up to Bosnia's elections. It was not international mediation, but the insights of the authors in Jacob Bercovitch's book are relevant to the problems my colleagues and I faced. Although the inter-state paradigm may be dated in this era of sub-national conflicts, the research and concepts of this collection are practical and relevant for people involved in today's conflicts or those trying to understand them. Like Bercovitch's other contributions, this is a valuable and well-balanced collection, succinct enough to appeal to practitioners as well as academics.

The book is organized thematically, in four parts, with 17 authors who have done important work in the field. Bercovitch's first chapter identifies both historical patterns of international third-party mediation and the factors associated with successful mediation. The factors (nature of mediator, mediation process, nature of parties and nature of the dispute) will be familiar to anyone following his work over the last decade. They can also be easily related to the contingency model of mediation.

Part 1 consists of three articles addressing bias, neutrality and power. Although this serves as a theoretical base for the book, the articles by Wehr and Lederach on mediating conflict in Central America and by Skjelback and Fermann on the mediating role of the UN Secretary General are essentially case studies building on theory. Wehr and Lederach in particular have a wealth of practical experience as mediators at the grass-roots level.

Carnavale's and Arad's chapter draws on experimental work with university students to examine how mediators adapt when the influence of the mediator is contingent upon multiple factors. The experiments indicate that mediators may be more concerned with apparent than actual fairness, and alter their behavior to be acceptable to the parties. Some of the conclusions are obvious (relative to partisans, non-partisan mediators value neutrality and even-handedness). Others are useful suggestions (a mediator who intends to make an unpopular suggestion should convince the recipient of his good intentions beforehand to take advantage of the cushioning effect).

Wehr's and Lederach's chapter is useful both for the concepts of mediation introduced, and for the detailed description of how these types of mediation worked in the context of the *Esquipulas* process. Whether you find the experimental data more convincing than Wehr's and Lederach's compelling description of the utility of the insider-partial mediator (helped along by Jimmy Carter as an "outsider-neutral") will depend on your background. The two chapters complement each other well, because experiments pitting university students against computers cannot approximate the deeply held cultural biases which

permeate international mediation. Lederach and Wehr provide insights into real mediation which are extended in Part 2.

In Part 2 (Culture and International Mediation) Cohen's chapter introduces the cultural requirement for a mediator, and the role mediators might play as interpreters, bridges, coordinators and buffers between cultural differences. Although useful as it stands, this chapter could draw effectively on Lederach's recent insights into elicitive conflict resolution techniques, in which cultures in conflict provide for the mediator the tools for resolution. This is what Carter might have been doing when he met with Sadat after the Camp David accords; was he emulating the traditional Egyptian village *mulakah*, or simply exerting superpower influence?

It is not immediately apparent that Mandell's chapter, "The Limits of Mediation: Lessons from the Syria-Israel Experience, 1974-1994," belongs in the section on culture. Mandell writes about the impact that a mediator can have over time on the normative order of the parties to a conflict, through formulating solutions, manipulating costs and benefits, and altering expectations. The cultural dimension would be more apparent if either Cohen's or Mitchell's chapter laid out the elements of culture which contribute to conflict, and with which mediators must contend. Religion, language, history, myth, and so on, undoubtedly contribute to the complexity of international mediation, but get scant mention.

Part 3 addresses the range of practice of international mediation, including case studies from Sri Lanka, Yugoslavia and international environmental negotiations. Although three cases cannot do justice to the full range (Bercovitch found 137 mediated conflicts in his earlier work) these three have been carefully selected to illustrate different aspects of international mediation. Rupesinghe's chapter illustrates lessons relevant to mediating internal conflicts, but also introduces problem-solving and conflict transformation techniques. Traditional mediation failed, he argues, because the conflict has been seen in narrow, zero-sum terms by the participants and by third parties who concede too little, too late. A more comprehensive peace building process requires international, regional and national frameworks, addressing root causes of violence, identifying and involving all the actors, and sustaining the effort over time. His observations are germane to the Yugoslav situation, which Webb, Kotrakou and Walters assess within the contingency model, suggesting that international and domestic interethnic strife may require different frameworks for analysis. The detailed description of complex mediation efforts in the former Yugoslavia illustrates the intractable nature of much of the conflict over ethnic control of territory. The dynamics of environmental mediation have the potential to be zero-sum, but there is considerably more scope for development of mutual gain strategies for common management, and for alternative dispute resolution involving environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS). Shmueli and Vranesky describe both the official and unofficial structure of international environment conferences and negotiations. If the chapter dealt more with links between environmental degradation and conflict, it would fit better with the rest of the book. Work by Thomas Homer-Dixon and the Project on Environment, Population and Security falls in this category.

Part 4 might be misleadingly titled. The chapters by Kriesberg and by Keashly and Fisher do not really extend the range of international mediation discussed thus far. In "Varieties of Mediating Activities and mediators in International Relations," Kriesberg addresses a small number of successful efforts by mediators, non-official and quasi-mediators in preparing to de-escalate, initiating negotiations, and implementing agreements. Like Keashly and Fisher, he concludes that it is useful to make distinctions within categories of activities, actors, and stages of conflict de-escalation. In "A Contingency Perspective on Conflict Interventions: Theoretical and Practical Considerations," Keashly and Fisher are more precise in their characterization of types of third party intervention. They suggest the conditions under which negotiation, pure mediation, consultation, arbitration, and consultation might be useful in sequencing de-escalation. Having had to deal first-hand with inter-ethnic conflict, I agree with Webb et al., that the complexity of these conflicts requires considerable flexibility in the application of models. Nevertheless, Bercovitch's factors and the contingency approach are an effective framework for thinking about the practical problems of real-world mediation.

Many of the perplexing themes of international mediation can be drawn from this collection. Should mediation approaches be made at multiple levels simultaneously, or should they be sequenced? Who are the most effective mediators? Is mediation more effective within an institutional framework? Are there more similarities or differences between missions in diverse cultures? There is food for thought on all of these issues. The contingency model for conflict resolution is central to the concepts of many of the articles. Given its conceptual and practical importance, it would be appropriate for the Fisher and Keashly article to be included in the first part of the book rather than the last.

If there is a criticism of this useful collection, it might be that much of the work is not new. Four of the eleven chapters date from 1991, and others have been published previously in journals. Nevertheless, it does not repeat material in Bercovitch's last collection edited with Jeffrey Z. Rubin, *Mediation in International Relations: Multiple Approaches to Conflict Management*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1992). The fact that two such useful collections now exist demonstrates that mediation is indeed fruitful ground.

David Last

Pearson Peacekeeping Centre