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Engaging Communication in Conflict: Systemic Practice

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Stephen W. Littlejohn and Kathy Domenici
Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA (2000)

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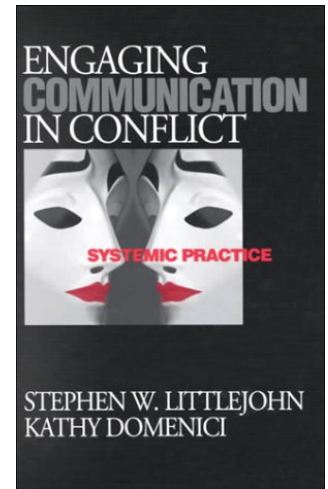
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Conflict courses abound in academia. The courses can be found in Sociology, Psychology, and other departments. What makes the approach of our field different? I eagerly opened *Engaging Communication in Conflict* hoping to find a book that had our discipline's special insight into conflict management.

The ethos of the authors was strong before I opened the book. Stephen Littlefield is a well-known communication theorist and Kathy Domenici is known in the conflict management field as a mediator. I thought that this might give the perfect combination for a communication-centered text. Unfortunately, that did not happen. While the term "communication" occurs throughout the book, there is little that makes it distinct for our field.

For the experienced practitioner of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), this is an excellent book. The authors give generously of their experiences and provide insight into mediators' thought processes as they plan and work with groups in conflict. They share examples of their own mediation experience and the ways in which they have had both success and challenges.

The book logically flows from small to large, complex systems conflicts. With each type of conflict the authors give clear explanations of the processes they use to analyze the conflict and to work with the parties in conflict. They provide numerous cases of both public and private conflict situations that help the reader understand that their work in conflict is not just theoretical. In fact, one of the strengths of the book is the practical application of the dispute resolution theory. They also make it clear that not all ADR work is immediately successful. The reality of conflict management complexity is not discussed in many books.

Throughout the book there are exercises that the ADR professional might use in his or her practice. There are also excellent processes that can help not only an ADR professional, but anyone working in groups. Their LARC model (listen, acknowledge, respond, commit) is one such example. They clearly explain the model so that the facilitator might easily adopt it. For the advanced professional, they provide ways to not only understand game theory, but to develop games that might be used for interventions.

This definitely is not an introductory text; there is heavy reliance on the reader's knowledge of the field and on the basic theories of their work. It is unfortunate that the authors chose to put the theory in an appendix rather than at the beginning of the book.

The authors fail to give background information that will help the beginning practitioner understand the field. The term "alternative dispute resolution" is used without any explanation. They talk about "mediating a dispute" without explaining mediation; a definition of mediation does not occur until page 61. They talk about "interventions" assuming that the reader knows what that is. By the third page, a novice to the field would be lost. The problem continues when they state that the book reflects "systemic practice" but never explain their definition of a system (17). Their subsequent discussion of how a mediator is an integral part of the system is quite informative; if one doesn't first understand systems theory, however, then she will be unable to understand their perspective. An excellent discussion of systems theory begins on page 125.

The problem continues in the next chapter, entitled "Dialogue." There are myriad interactions called "dialogue," but from the little background given here, it is unclear what they mean by the term. Readers are left with their own impressions, which might be quite different from the author's intentions.

The "communication perspective" of their conflict work is vague. They say that they are using Pearce's "communication perspective" which states that

communication is a way of looking, a perspective from which any human experience might be viewed. Whenever you are looking at how social worlds are made, you are taking a communication perspective. So the meanings of walking, eating, and sleeping are constructed through communication. (14)

The implications of the perspective that follow that statement do nothing to help the novice understand either the field of communication or the perspective of communication in conflict management. This is disappointing, especially given Littlejohn's enormous reputation in the field. One wishes that he would clearly articulate the ways in which their work has a communication perspective that makes it different from the perspectives of other ADR practitioners.

This book could be used in a number of academic contexts. It would not stand alone as an introductory book because it assumes too much background knowledge. But if it was integrated with some basic theory, it could be useful as a supplemental text. It would be an excellent text for a practitioner who already has an understanding of Alternative Dispute Resolution and wants additional understanding of conflict management systems and additional ideas for working with groups.

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