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# Conflict in the Community: A Challenge for Land Grant Universities

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# CONFLICT IN THE COMMUNITY: A CHALLENGE FOR LAND GRANT UNIVERSITIES[1]

**by Thomas W. Ilvento**

## ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the notion of conflict in the community and then discusses a relatively new strategy for dealing with community conflict that is gaining popularity: alternative dispute resolution (ADR), particularly mediation. While ADRs are not entirely new, there has been a renewed interest in them as viable strategies for community development and public policy education. Conflict in communities is ubiquitous and should demand greater attention by rural sociologists, particularly those involved in community development. Environmental mediation is a strategy through which rural sociologists can effectively assist a community in resolving conflict. Furthermore, as rural sociologists study and practice environmental mediation, they can provide their colleagues, as well as communities, with a deeper understanding of community conflict and the value of mediation in resolving differences. Since environmental mediation is consistent with principles of good practice in community development, it also is a useful tool for the community development practitioner. Environmental mediation is a viable area for research, teaching, and Extension education.

## INTRODUCTION

Contrary to our conception of community as idyllic, community conflict is often present and visible. Conflict can emerge over land use, preservation of agricultural lands, property rights, school district consolidations, hazardous waste disposal, nuclear power plants, and the

[1] This article is a revised version of the presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the Southern Rural Sociological Association, 1995. Thomas W. Ilvento is an Associate Professor in the Department of Food and Resource Economics at the University of Delaware. The author would like to recognize the contributions of reviewers John Allen and Lori Garkovich.

location of Walmarts, to name a few issues. The presence of conflict in communities has not always been seen as an opportunity for rural sociologists and the institutions in which they serve. While conflict in community sociology and community development has long been considered fascinating, it is not without its own controversy. Depending upon the perspective, conflict has been viewed as both dysfunctional and functional, a curse and an opportunity, a situation in which all hope is lost and one in which true change can begin (Alinsky, 1971; Coleman, 1957; Daley & Kettner, 1981; Khinduka, 1977; Robinson, 1989).

Those who work in community development and actively engage in community discourses realize quickly that conflict can be expected in community life. However, academics and Extension professionals often have difficulty defining their role in these disputes. A few have opted for radical involvement, but most take stances from guarded involvement as a "neutral observer" to complete avoidance.

This paper seeks to revisit the notion of conflict in the community and then move on to discuss a relatively new strategy for dealing with community conflict that is gaining popularity: alternative dispute resolution (ADR), particularly mediation. It discusses this strategy in the framework of community and community development, recognizing that conflict is a known and expected outcome of community interaction. Given the presence of conflict, I move on to suggest that the essence of community development calls for some involvement of community development specialists and practitioners in helping community members deal with conflict. Mediation and other forms of ADR are thus viable strategies for community development and public policy education. Finally, I will also explore the roles rural sociologists can play in mediation through research, teaching, and extension.

## CONFLICT

Social conflict has been defined as "a behavioral threat by one party directed at territory--rights, interests, or privileges--of another party" (Robinson, 1989, p. 89). According to Coleman (1957), most conflict occurs because of differences over economic issues, power or authority, or cultural values and beliefs. The latter includes race and ethnocentrism. These areas of differences reflect the types of conflict identified by Howard (1974), which are substantive conflict (over scarce

resources), symbolic conflict (over symbolic issues), ideological conflict, and cultural conflict.

The manifestation of conflict can been seen in disputes over land use planning, levels of development, race relations, the environment, the direction of the economy, and jobs. Coleman (1957) notes that most community conflicts follow definite patterns, including movement from the specific to the general, movement towards new issues and diversification, and movement from issues to personal attacks.

The role of conflict in the community has been vigorously debated among sociologists. Much of the earlier discussion focused on reactions to systems theory and structural functionalism. These approaches tended to view conflict as dysfunctional, representing a problem, a mal-integration, or a "disequilibrium" in the system (Parsons, 1951). Thus, while existence of conflict was acknowledged, conflict was viewed more as an abnormality that needed to be fixed. Society, and community as a microcosm of society, was based more on consensus and cooperation rather than conflict.

Theorists have noted that conflict can be functional to groups, communities, and societies. In *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1956), Coser expanded upon the work of Geog Simmel in looking at the function of conflict in social organizations. According to Coser

1. Conflict permits internal dissension and dissatisfaction to rise to the surface and enables a group to restructure itself or to deal with dissatisfactions.

2. Conflict provides for the emergence of new norms of appropriate behavior by surfacing shortcomings.

3. Conflict provides a means of ascertaining the strength of current power structures.

4. Conflict may work to strengthen boundaries between groups; a sharper distinction between the groups emerge.

5. Conflict creates bonds between loosely structured groups, unifying dissent and unrelated elements.

6. Conflict works as a stimulus to reduce stagnation; it may alter society.

Coser shows that conflict is an expected outcome of social interaction that can have important benefits for groups and society as a whole. Others, such as Alinsky (1971), demonstrate that principles of conflict can be applied effectively within community development.

Despite the potential benefits of conflict, it is given little attention in community literature. While both Christenson and Robinson (1989) and Poplin (1979) have a chapter on conflict, most classic community textbooks do not discuss community conflict to any great degree. For example, in *The Community: An Introduction to a Social System* (1958), Sanders devotes only a few pages to conflict and refers to mediation only in relation to labor disputes. Likewise, conflict is not covered directly either in Warren's *Community in America* (1978) or in Luloff and Swanson's *American Rural Communities* (1990). Conflict is not given much attention in the literature of rural sociology, either. For example, the 50-Year Index (1985) lists only eight articles on conflict. Classic texts from *Rural Sociology: The Strategy of Change* (Loomis & Beegle, 1957) to *Social Change in Rural Societies: An Introduction to Rural Sociology* (Rogers et al., 1988) do not cover conflict to any great degree. Texts that do address conflict do so mostly in terms of farm movements or town-country conflict (see, for example, Smith & Zopf, 1970). When community conflict is recognized, the recognition is typically a nod to the "benefits of conflict," however nebulously defined. As Jim Christenson (1989) noted,

> Although the conflict theme is interesting to discuss, when it comes down to using the approach it seems that most authors who write for the *Journal* do not become involved in or do not become participant observers of the conflict approach. Instead they write about Saul Alinsky. (p. 37)

There is little information available about the prevalence of conflict in society. In 1987, the General Social Survey asked several questions about conflict among groups in America. Each question contrasted two groups and asked the respondent if there was "very strong conflict" to "no conflict". The data for the five questions is given in Table 1 below. Over half of the respondents felt that there was very

strong or strong conflict between poor people and rich people and between management and workers. The respondents also felt there was considerable conflict between unemployed and employed people (44.4 percent very strong and strong conflict, combined). In all cases, a subsample of black respondents felt there was higher conflict than did the total population.

**Table 1. Perceived conflict among groups in the United States based on the General Social Survey, 1987.[a]**

| Contrast groups | Total respondents | Black subsample |
|---|---|---|
| | Percent very strong and strong conflict | Percent very strong and strong conflict |
| Poor people and rich people | 57.6% | 67.0% |
| Working class and middle class | 19.8% | 41.2% |
| Unemployed and employed people | 44.4% | 61.6% |
| Management and workers | 51.1% | 59.1% |
| Farmers and city people | 35.1% | 43.0% |

[a]Data taken from the General Social Survey Data and Information Retrieval System (GSSDIRS) on the World Wide Web (http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/gss/)

In a study of the general population in Kentucky, Hustedde and Gage (1995) asked respondents a series of questions about community conflict. In response to the question, "Has your community faced a serious conflict within the last year?" 55 percent of the respondents indicated yes. The largest number of the community conflicts were concerned with environmental (38.3 percent) or development issues (29.7 percent). Forty percent felt that the conflict was handled in hostile ways which destroyed relationships.

## CONFLICT AND THE COMMUNITY

Community conflict takes place within the confines of a community as a result of interaction among community members. As such, it is useful to begin the discussion with some notion of what we mean by community. Community has generally been defined in terms of space, people, interaction, shared institutions and values, and distribution of power, and as a social system (Warren, 1978). The following simplified definition captures many of these concepts: *"Community is a place where people interact to meet their daily needs."*

Thus, community has the following components:

- **Place:** Most definitions of community are tied to some geographic area. Common space in part defines interaction, sustenance activities, and linkages to a shared daily experience. The fact that people live and work together provides opportunities for interaction, some of which may lead to conflict. The spatial aspects of communities may change over time in response to growth or decline, emerging issues, or new technologies, but place still matters for social interaction. For example, field theory, which speaks of community as emerging and dissipating over time in relation to issues, recognizes space as a limiting factor of interaction (Kaufman, 1959; Wilkinson, 1970). Some have argued that new communication technologies such as satellite disks, fiber optic cables, and the Internet will make spatial dimensions less relevant (Dillman, 1985; Nisbet, 1967). While new technologies have great potential to increase communications, it is not clear that technology can replace the fundamental relationship between propinquity and interaction; people tend to have more interaction with those in closer proximity (Warren, 1978).

- **Interaction:** Most theories of community also express the community as a place of interaction (Wilkinson, 1986). From systems theory to field theory, the notion of people, groups, and populations interacting is essential to the notion of a common connection. Community interaction takes

place as a result of the locality-relevant functions (production-distribution-consumption, socialization, social control, social participation, and mutual support) and involves aspects of exchange, power, shared values, and conflict (Warren, 1978).

- **Meeting daily needs:** Most theories of community express community as a place where people seek to meet their basic needs. Warren (1978) suggests the locality-relevant functions of the community are

    - Production-Distribution-Consumption
    - Socialization
    - Social Control
    - Social Participation
    - Mutual Support

Warren goes on to suggest that the vitality of our communities can be measured in terms of how well these functions are performed and the degree to which they are performed locally, or at least expressed in terms of local goals and objectives. This concept leads towards Warren's theory of how communities have changed from places where the preponderance of interaction lies along horizontal ties within the community to places where there is an increase of vertical ties to entities outside the community. Horizontal ties are linkages among individuals and groups that take place on the community level. Vertical ties are linkages of local individuals and groups with contacts within the larger society.

If community is a place where people interact to meet their daily needs, then community conflict takes place within a geographic area and relates to people's interaction. Community conflicts arise over the production and consumption of goods (labor strikes and disputes over the siting of a new industrial plant); socialization (arguments over curriculum in the schools); social control (the use of excessive police force when dealing with minorities); social participation (the tensions between church and state); and mutual support (the battle over the proper response to unwanted pregnancies).

## CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Warren's work (1978) suggests that communities can be differentiated by their relative autonomy in community matters, the coincidence of service areas, the psychological identification of members to the locality, and the strength of horizontal patterns. Problems within a community arise for many reasons, some of which are extra-local in nature. However, the difficulties communities face when responding to problems can in part be traced to weaknesses along these dimensions. From this perspective, community development can be viewed as strategies to assist communities improve their quality of life by building leadership and local identification, increasing local involvement, strengthening local ties, and making vertical ties work for the community. Wilkinson and others have elaborated upon this notion by distinguishing between *development in the community* and *development of the community*, the latter being purposive efforts to strengthen local community ties (Wilkinson, 1972, 1985; see also Shaffer & Summers, 1989). Thus, community development is seen as a locally driven approach involving local people. The community developer who is outside the community is typically seen as assisting change through one of three approaches: self-help, technical assistance, and conflict (Christenson, 1989).

**Self-Help Approach.** The self-help approach is one in which the community development specialist takes on the role of facilitator and educator. Assistance is often provided through training and leadership development to prepare community members to respond to their own community issues. In this approach, the specialist is seen as neutral and unbiased, allowing community members to make their own decisions based on information. Public policy approaches that involve discussions of choices, alternatives, and consequences would most likely fall into this sphere of community development.

**Technical Assistance Approach.** Some community issues require the assistance of a consultant, who provides technical support for efforts such as needs assessment surveys, focus groups, economic development planning, and grant writing. The role of the community development specialist is to provide the technical expertise needed by the community, but the decisions surrounding the need, use, and implementation of the information are left to the community.

**Conflict Approach.** In the conflict approach, the community development specialist has traditionally been seen as an organizer of the "have-nots" who is actively involved in the formation of issues as well as strategies to address issues. In the conflict approach the concerns of neutrality are mitigated by the need to help some members of the community have a greater role in matters that affect their lives. This approach has been used when community members are highly stratified and there are large differentials in power among the actors.

The self-help and technical assistance approaches are by far the dominant approaches to community development, particularly that practiced in universities and through the Cooperative Extension Service. Within the Cooperative Extension Service and the larger land grant mission, direct involvement in community affairs has been frowned upon as beyond the scope of the mission. Thus, areas of conflict within communities have often been referred to as not being "teachable moments" and as not appropriate for the involvement of Extension personnel. At the county level, Extension agents have often felt that involvement in controversial issues would be viewed as taking sides or a loss of neutrality, and thus would be detrimental to their ability to work effectively within the community.

There are normative approaches or principles for community development that have shaped practitioners' activities. For example, the SEED Program at the University of Kentucky (Social and Economic Education for Development) emphasizes the following principles:

- Implementing projects locally
- Fostering broad citizen participation
- Developing the community both economically and socially
- Building leadership skills for future projects
- Strengthening the community's human resources
- Building on the unique aspects of the local community

Similarly, the Community Development Society publishes a list of "Principles of Good Practice," which includes the following:

- Promote active and representative citizen participation so that community members can meaningfully influence decisions that affect their lives.

- Engage community members in problem diagnosis so that those affected may adequately understand the causes of their situation.
- Help community leaders understand the economic, social, political, environmental, and psychological impact associated with alternative solutions.
- Assist community members in designing and implementing a plan to solve agreed-upon problems by emphasizing shared leadership and active citizen participation in that process.
- Disengage from any effort that is likely to affect adversely the disadvantaged segments of a community.
- Actively work to increase leadership capacity (skills, confidence, and aspirations) in the community.

These principles guide practitioners in terms of what kinds of activities they engage in, as well as the way they go about their work. They emphasize local involvement, a sense of fairness, sustainable activities, and inclusiveness of all effected parties. These principles, coupled with the discussion of the various roles in community development, provide guidelines for practitioners to decide which issues to get involved with and in what manner. They suggest that there is a role for practitioners in issues that

- Are community wide
- Involve multiple parties
- Require technical or process expertise
- Build linkages among groups
- Build leadership

Many of these conditions apply in community conflicts.

Thus far I have shown that conflict is an expected force in community life. As a place where people interact, the community will necessarily involve conflict among various groups, particularly over locality-relevant functions. However, the scholarly literature provides little insight into the nature or prevalence of these community conflicts. When acknowledged, conflict has been seen by many practitioners as something to avoid, despite the seeming appropriateness of involvement

based on the guiding principles for community development listed above. Essentially, one must go outside the university to find any useful information on approaches to conflict and community organizing. I would argue further that university-based sociologists and community development practitioners, particularly in colleges of agriculture, and even more particularly in the Cooperative Extension Service, do not view conflict as an area for study or fruitful endeavor. In fact, we are most often advised to stay as far away from conflict as possible. Situations that are volatile are generally viewed as politically dangerous. When a community is embroiled in conflict, Extension's strategy is to wait until the embers die before offering assistance in putting out the fire.

There are of course wonderful exceptions in the programs of a few innovators, but I would argue that most community development as practiced by land grant universities is based on an assumption of consensus and not conflict. However, there are potential dangers in Extension professionals avoiding conflict in communities or attempting to use a consensus approach when conflict arises. In the former case, we risk being ineffective and unable to respond to the real needs of the community. In the latter case, we may serve to perpetuate inequalities and unequal participation in the community. Perhaps the lack of involvement in conflict, particularly for community development practitioners in land grant institutions, stems from lack of good models for practice. It is my belief that alternative dispute resolution strategies such as mediation can provide useful models.

## ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO DISPUTE RESOLUTION AND MEDIATION

In dealing with community conflict, there has been a trend towards new approaches that fall under the heading of alternative dispute resolution. The many variations and strategies that can be labeled alternative dispute resolution provide a unique perspective that can be fruitful for community development practitioners. Alternative dispute resolution is consistent with basic principles of community development and will increasingly play a role in community development efforts. Some in the public policy arena are beginning to explore ADRs for addressing controversial public policy issues (Danielson & Garber, 1993; Jones, 1993).

One alternative approach is mediation. Mediation can be used in a range of issues, from domestic disputes to multi-party disputes that affect large numbers of people in a community. The latter are referred to as "Environmental Mediation" or "Public Policy Mediation," which is the main focus for the rest of this paper (CDR Associates, 1994). These disputes are community or regional in nature, often involve more than two parties, and often require a year or more to resolve. Mediation is related to a number of strategies for resolving community conflict, from facilitation to issue gatherings using the Kettering Foundation's approach. It has been embraced by a number of disciplines as an alternative to costly litigation (see, for example, "Alternative dispute resolution." [1993]. *Kentucky Bench and Bar*, *57*[4]) or in extremely volatile community conflicts.

The terms *mediation*, *facilitation*, and *negotiation*, often used in settings of public policy and community issues, have very different meanings and applications. All of these approaches have some relevance in community development and community sociology. Table 2 lists some characteristics of each process to help clarify differences and similarities. Mediation is the intervention of an acceptable, impartial, and neutral third party in assisting two or more individuals (or groups) in a dispute or conflict. Mediation may involve a couple in a divorce settlement or a whole community deciding the location of a new airport. The goal of mediation is to assist the parties in voluntarily reaching their own mutually acceptable settlement. The role of the mediator is to help people in conflict to coordinate and be more effective in their bargaining so as to reach a settlement or agreement. Mediation is non-adversarial in its approach and does not seek to judge the positions or interests of the parties. In fact, part of the mediation process is to illuminate the positions of the parties to increase understanding. For mediation to work, the mediator must be viewed as having no decision-making power or authority to force an agreement.

Facilitation is the assistance of an impartial individual in the design and conduct of a problem-solving process. The goal of facilitation is to improve the problem-solving process so that the participants may arrive at their jointly agreed upon goal. The role of the facilitator is to design the process to enhance discussion in a fair and impartial way. The facilitator conducts the meeting to maximize participation of the parties. Facilitation often lasts for only a meeting or two.

**Table 2. Defining characteristics of alternative methods of dealing with conflict.**

| Characteristics | Facilitation | Negotiation | Mediation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **There is an existing conflict** | Not necessarily | Necessarily | Necessarily |
| **It is an alternative to litigation** | Not usually | Usually | Primarily |
| **It is useful for public policy** | Yes | Not usually | Possibly |
| **The professional maintains confidentiality** | Desirable but not required | Usually | Usually |
| **The professional is neutral** | Yes | No | Yes |
| **The professional has a stake in outcome** | No | Yes | No |
| **The parties seek agreement** | Sometimes | Yes | Yes |
| **The parties have power to decide** | Not necessarily | Yes (highly desirable) | Yes |
| **The process requires parties to make trade-offs** | No | Yes | Yes |

In contrast to the other two approaches, in which the professional must be seen as neutral, negotiation involves a professional representing one of the parties. Labor disputes and collective bargaining often involve negotiators. Negotiation is a problem-solving process in which two or more people voluntarily discuss their differences and attempt to reach a

joint decision on their common concerns. The goal is an exchange or promise made by the parties to each other. The negotiator's role is to identify issues of concern, represent the needs and interests of one of the parties, generate possible settlement options, and bargain over the final terms of the agreement.

Table 3 provides comments on the appropriateness of facilitation, negotiation, and mediation as conflict resolution strategies. While all approaches seek some form of mutual agreement, negotiation and mediation are most useful when the parties' emotional intensity is high, the parties are polarized over the issue, the parties must depend on each other to reach a solution, and the parties feel a sense of urgency. Mediation in particular is useful in situations in which opposing sides are hopelessly deadlocked and each side can effectively stalemate the other. Classic community conflicts over development, land use, environmental issues, and race relations often involve groups that are divided and engaged in endless debate. The mediator can be effective in bringing the parties together, helping them build greater understanding and trust, and moving them to explore ways to reach a mutually beneficial agreement.

An important consideration is at what point is mediation effective in community conflicts. It does not work well in all conflict situations. Allen (1992) speaks of three stages of community conflict. The first is a build-up stage, in which the issue starts to emerge, groups start to form, and informal discussion begins. The second stage is defined as "high conflict." In this stage the discussion becomes heated, the emotional intensity increases, and people often resort to personal attacks. During the high conflict stage community members also sense the level of risk in the conflict, both in terms of social interaction and litigation. The final stage of conflict is a post- or new build-up stage, or a "lull in the storm" (p. 2). According to Allen, mediation works best in the build-up and high conflict stages, but not in the transition between them. If the conflict is caught early in the build-up stage, mediation can provide community members with an opportunity to engage in discussion. In the high conflict stage a sense of urgency or an ultimatum can lead community members to realize the need for an alternative approach. However, between these stages positions often are entrenched and the sense of risk not fully realized. Between these stages groups hold an I-want-to-win mentality which does not lend itself to outside intervention.

**Table 3. Appropriateness of facilitation, negotiation and mediation in conflict situations.**

| Characteristics | Facilitation works best when | Negotiation works best when | Mediation works best when |
|---|---|---|---|
| **The emotional intensity of the parties is** | Low to moderate | Moderate to high | Moderate to high |
| **The parties or issues are** | Not polarized | Polarized | Polarized |
| **Dependency among the parties** | May or may not exist | Is high for this issue | Is high for this issue and in general |
| **The level of trust among the parties is** | Reasonable | Such that each can leverage or influence each other | Ongoing and such that each can leverage or influence each other |
| **The parties will benefit** | From a jointly acceptable outcome | From a jointly acceptable outcome | From a jointly acceptable outcome |
| **Agreement among the parties is** | Not essential but desirable | The purpose of the negotiation | The purpose of the mediation |
| **The sense of a deadline** | Does not exist--there is no sense of urgency | Exists--there is a sense of urgency | Exists--there is a sense of urgency |
| **The number of parties** | Medium to Large--10 to 50 | Small--2 to 5 | Small to Large--2 to 50 |

## A CLOSER LOOK AT MEDIATION: HOW DOES IT WORK?

Most forms of environmental mediation use some form of principled negotiation made popular by Fisher and Ury (1991). Principled negotiation is often contrasted to more traditional forms of positional bargaining, in which the parties begin with a position on a dispute and debate their points of view. As an alternative to a position approach, principled negotiation is based on the following four elements of negotiation: people, interests, options, and criteria.

**People: Separate the People from the Problem.** As Coleman (1957) noted, conflicts often move rapidly from the issue to personal antagonism. The mediator has two kinds of interests, the substance of the issue(s) and the relationship between the parties. However, problems often arise when relationships (or lack thereof) become entangled with the problem. Positional bargaining tends to put the relationship and the issue in conflict with each other. However, principled negotiation seeks to separate the relationship from the substance and deal directly with the people problem. According to Fisher and Ury (1991), the mediator can do this by discerning the parties' positions, perceptions, and values; recognizing the presence and role of each party's emotions; improving the level of communication among parties; and preventing problems by building trust. The mediator's facilitation and communication skills are very important in these efforts.

**Interests: Focus on Interests, Not Positions.** Too often in community conflicts, the focus is on positions rather than underlying interests. Positions often appear rigid and inflexible. For example, in a landfill dispute one position could be, "We do not want the landfill located in our county." However, further probing could reveal that the underlying interests might be concerns about health, traffic, or property values. Interests are the fears and desires that cause people to take a particular position. The interests of the parties may or may not be compatible and may or may not be at odds. In contrast, positions often lead to stalemates and increased conflict. A mediator's role is to help people identify their interests rather than their positions and seek a solution based on these interests. In some cases, the parties may not be fully aware of their interests, so the mediator seeks ways to help them discover them. Through this process of guided self-discovery, the parties can examine, discuss, and possibly satisfy their interests.

**Options: Invent Options for Mutual Gain.** In many conflicts, the parties tend to view the situation as a "fixed pie" with little or no options. Thus the conflict is a win/lose or zero sum affair rather than a search for alternatives or common ground. One strategy is to "expand the pie" before identifying potential options for resolving the conflict. In this approach the mediator helps the parties look for mutual gain and additional resources that might help address stated interests.

**Criteria: Insist on Using Objective Criteria.** When parties are locked in an impasse, it often is useful for them to focus on objective standards that can be agreed upon. For example, how will the parties know that traffic flow is reduced or that everyone agrees on drinking water standards? For there to be trust, mutually agreed upon criteria must be set. These standards may be based on research, past experience, accepted practice, and government or industry standards, as well as on principles of fairness, justice, and integrity. Regardless, the role of the mediator is to help the parties discuss their standards and help them arrive at objective criteria

## Other Aspects of Being a Mediator

There is a continuing debate about who should be able to function as a mediator (Paquin & Zerhusen, 1993). Some feel that mediators should be lawyers who have been trained by a recognized or accredited mediation course. Those outside the legal profession have argued that legal training, while perhaps advantageous, should not be a requirement. Instead, they argue, it is more important to focus on the performance of the mediator and his or her skills, some of which involve being perceived as neutral to all parties, rephrasing ideas and comments, eliciting information from both sides and moving towards collaborative solutions, and managing conflict among the parties (Paquin & Zerhusen, 1993). A mediator requires a unique set of skills that must be cultivated and built upon; mediation is not for everyone. Furthermore, a mediator might be effective in one situation, but not be seen as neutral in another. However, even those who are not comfortable with being a mediator may have roles in studying and promoting mediation as an alternative strategy.

**Environmental Mediation and Community Development**

Environmental mediation fits well within community development frameworks. Environmental mediation is compatible with all of the practices listed by the Community Development Society as "Principles of Good Practice." Environmental mediation seeks to be inclusive. By providing mechanisms for disenfranchised, low-income, and generally uninvolved community members to participate in decisions which affect their lives, it strives to bring all the relevant parties to the table, including ones who usually are excluded or uninvited. Once the parties are at the table, environmental mediation encourages them to participate actively in the process of problem solving and of developing the final outcome. It helps the parties to understand the social and economic forces that shape the issue, as well as the interests of the other parties, and to agree upon a solution which involves each party in the responsibilities to implement, monitor, or evaluate progress. As a low cost alternative to litigation, environmental mediation affords more people the opportunity to participate. Also, by involving participants in a lengthy mediation process, it helps them build their capacity for future community development activities. Environmental mediation allows people to decide for themselves, encourages "leadership by doing," and fosters increased understanding among groups in this process, all of which engender good community development.

## THE ROLE OF LAND GRANT UNIVERSITIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIATION

Land grant universities can get involved in environmental mediation in a number of ways, most of which follow along the traditional roles of research, teaching, and extension. In some cases rural sociologists have a unique role to play in the process, while in others we are but one of many groups involved in mediation.

Currently, there is very little research on mediation in general or environmental mediation in particular. As noted earlier, little research in rural sociology has focused on conflict. However, there are many opportunities for research that could contribute greatly to the development and use of mediation. Case studies are needed to examine and test various aspects of successful (or unsuccessful) mediation,

including the role and style of the mediator, the type of dispute, and the socio-economic class of the participants. Research could also focus on the conditions under which mediation ought to occur, an evaluation of different types of conflict resolution, and further elaboration of community conflict. From a community sociology perspective, research on the attitudes, experiences, and changes of the participants in environmental mediation would be useful to future practitioners.

Within the land grant university, students need to be schooled in mediation and other strategies for conflict resolution. As more colleges of agriculture develop majors in environmental sciences or natural resources, conservation, and management, the need for exposure to mediation strategies will become greater. Students in many of these fields can expect to come into contact with conflict in their involvement in community projects. Mediation skills can be seen as another set of generalized skills (such as communication and writing) needed in a competitive workplace.

Within Extension, mediation can perhaps have the most impact. Danielson and Garber (1993) suggest three roles Extension can play: facilitator, promoter/educator, and practicing mediator. The three roles require some direct knowledge of mediation and its application to community conflict. The first role is one of recognizing the role mediation can play in a community dispute, educating participants on its value, and helping to arrange an neutral third party to serve as a mediator. As a facilitator, the Extension educator is not directly involved in the dispute, but assists the parties in coming into mediation. The facilitator may also serve a role in convening or assessing the local situation prior to the mediation process.

The role of promoter/educator is similar to the classroom role listed above, but in this case the clientele are other Extension educators, administrators, state and local officials, and community members. Much of the other conflict resolution education would fit into the promoter/educator's efforts. One of the oldest examples of conflict resolution education materials is Jerry Robinson's *Conflict Management Training Program* (1978), which has been used in many leadership programs. A more recent program, *Public Conflict: Turning Lemons into Lemonade* (1995b), developed by Ron Hustedde at the University of Kentucky, has been successful in training Extension educators, administrators, and public officials. These programs increase awareness

about conflict and provide participants with tools to address conflict in the workplace and public meetings. Other types of materials provide more detailed information on mediation as a strategy in community conflicts (see, for example, Allen, 1992; Hustedde, 1995a; Ilvento et al., 1995). These materials seek to introduce the audience to mediation as a viable alternative in conflict.

The role of mediator presents the greatest challenge to traditional roles of the land grant university. Even though the mediator must be seen as a neutral third party in a dispute, the notion that university personnel would be directly involved in a community dispute as a mediator is still sensitive. Administrators have been slow to support this role, and many rural sociologists have been reluctant to take it on. There are several reasons for this reluctance. The first is obvious: the reward structure is not in place to recognize this work. Mediation can be an intensive, lengthy process that does not necessarily result in publications or research articles. It is also difficult to evaluate in an outcome-based program model. Some Extension educators are reluctant to be held accountable in mediation activities. A second, less obvious reason is that environmental mediation can often require long periods of time to complete, up to one year or more in some cases. Few faculty or Extension educators are able to commit that amount of time to this process. However, a few rural sociologists have served as mediators in small claims court, family relations, organizational conflicts, and community disputes. In these cases practitioners typically did not commit large blocks of time to mediation, and their experiences subsequently provided valuable insight for research, teaching, and extension education.

Regardless of the role taken, research, teaching, or Extension, the key to the involvement of land grant institutions in community conflict and mediation lies with administrators (Danielson & Garber, 1993). Unless administrators see the value of mediation and are willing to support research, teaching, and Extension programs in this area, involvement of faculty will be limited. While some institutions have supported mediation in the various roles, greater support is still needed.

## CONCLUSIONS

Conflict in communities is ubiquitous and should demand greater attention from rural sociologists, particularly those involved in

community development. Sociologists such as Coser, Coleman, Kaufman, and Wilkinson argue that conflict in a community should be expected and is a potentially fruitful activity. As issues periodically emerge in a community, some may be effectively addressed through collective action, which may involve conflict (Kaufman, 1959). Some communities respond to the conflict through collaborative strategies, while others struggle in high-conflict stages (Allen, 1992).

The community development literature suggests that practitioners have a role in helping communities deal with conflict. While many community developers are wary of the use of conflict in community development and of involving themselves in it, their wariness does not negate the possibility of their providing assistance. Rather than avoiding conflict, practitioners should find ways to respond by providing mechanisms with which communities can discuss, participate in, and resolve conflicts.

Environmental mediation is a strategy through which rural sociologists can effectively assist a community in resolving conflict. Furthermore, as rural sociologists study and practice environmental mediation, they can provide their colleagues, as well as communities, with a deeper understanding of community conflict and the value of mediation in resolving differences. Since environmental mediation is consistent with principles of good practice in community development, it also is a useful tool for the community development practitioner. Environmental mediation is a viable area for research, teaching, and Extension education. I hope that in ten years there will be a greater body of knowledge on its effectiveness, as well as more education programs in its use.

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