Research on Mediation - Why its tricky and why we need to do it

In the next few weeks, my first cohort of Mediators in Conflict Management students will be submitting their research proposals. I can see in their eyes and hear from them the excitement of finally getting the ball rolling. This is particularly exciting, seeing the students in the early stages of their research journey. I get to learn more about their research topics and how they came to choose these. I get to offer them support and guidance and advice to help them with their research. I also get to see how difficult it can be to identify a research topic.

And to my long suffering students, the finishing line is in sight, stay strong…

Research in conflict and mediation, in particular, poses its own unique challenges. Some of these might be off-putting to prospective students as it is worth addressing these in a little more detail to establish how they can be overcome.

First of all, where is the gap? I heard you. Those who have an interest in mediation are well aware of areas in which conflict and mediation has shown deficiencies or in which research is scarce. For academics this is easy: identifying a gap is the research. Mediation is such an under-researched area in conflict resolution and that makes it attractive for students as well. But identifying the right gap might be harder than it seems. The research question needs to be specific enough to allow for the research to be completed and relevant to either the mediaters or the clients. This is also crucial for funding programmes or funding (or otherwise). These challenges are all part of the research. Research is the act of identifying a gap.

Next, the challenge of research design. This can be a frustrating, isolating and terribly exciting. I get to see the results and outcomes of the research completed, and help the new students choose interesting topics. I get to work with enthusiastic, interested and passionate students and help them develop their ideas further. But the research is also very difficult. In my experience, what researchers are most interested in is what happens in the mediation. Research is a very complex area. It is also intensely rewarding. Even if a small study on a narrow topic might feel like it is not working, it is working on something that is not generally identified as an area worth funding research into. I definitely don't have an easy answer for this one but, again, a bit of lateral thinking might help. As I've already said, conflict and mediation is a huge field that has tributaries into many other disciplines. Some of these other disciplines do benefit from mediation itself. In my experience, what researchers are most interested in is what happens in the mediation. This issue prevails not just at postgraduate level but in all research contexts in this area. It is not an easy one to overcome. Students may have more luck with larger, possibly funded services where appropriate safeguards can be put in place. This is not always possible.

Students may have more luck with larger, possibly funded services where appropriate safeguards can be put in place. This is not always possible. For the majority of students, research can be in the form of unpublished research dissertations which can be difficult to access if they are located in another university – a request to students everywhere - publish your research people!!!

None of these challenges should put potential research students off. Research in conflict and mediation is urgently needed to inform our practices, to shape policy at governmental level so as to assist in understanding this complex area. It is crucial to be able to offer a research perspective. It is crucial to understand the benefits of research and what impact it has on the clients and the mediators. Research can be a frustrating, isolating and terribly exciting. I get to see the results and outcomes of the research completed, and help the new students choose interesting topics. I get to work with enthusiastic, interested and passionate students and help them develop their ideas further. But the research is also very difficult. In my experience, what researchers are most interested in is what happens in the mediation.