Try this thought experiment: imagine a mediator without empathy. How and what would they do? Would there be adversarial defeat?

The response to these questions probably depends on our own experience of empathy. This simple yet often underestimated term underpins a category and technology set of ideas about human connections. Because we believe empathy is at the core of mediation, we consider it a construct worth closer scrutiny. Below is a summary of our recent work. (For a full account see Charlie Irvine and Laurel Farrington, Mediation and Empathy, Perception and Regulation. Emotions: Perception and Regulation, 2017. Please refer to this post as: Charlie Irvine, ‘Empathy’, Kluwer Mediation Blog, February 2018.)

Empathy

The English word is relatively recent (early 20th century) and comes from a German idea of understanding art from the dual perspective of artist and observer. A modern and widely-accepted definition is “the ability to identify what someone is feeling and express appropriate (or similar) feelings.” (Helen Copping and Penny Proudfoot, Empathy: Perceptions and Regard, 2017.)

Empathy is woven into human life. If we are lucky, our early experience of being cared for and, dare we say it, loved, enables us to give and receive empathy throughout the lifespan. Mediation is a process that offers multiple opportunities to appreciate both events and emotions behind each other’s perspective: in other words, to listen, interpret, identify what someone is thinking or feeling with an appropriate response to their thoughts and feelings and solicitude for their safety and wellbeing. Attachment theory posits that the attachment figure, a ‘secure base’ enabling parties to both enter and remain in the room. The mediator’s presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver. People can now display curiosity rather than fear, engaging in the work needed to resume exploration in the reassuring presence of their caregiver.