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Mediators and Dialogue Facilitators: One Profession or Competitors?

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This post is based on the research of two professional communities – mediators and dialogue facilitators – in Ukraine (see the research article) and poses a few preliminary questions that require deeper thinking and more research. Although the fieldwork for my article was done in Ukraine, I was told that similar developments are also noticeable in Europe and elsewhere where mediators and facilitators are working towards greater professionalization in parallel, without much interaction with each other, if any at all. Each professional field has occupied its own niche, developed schemes of certification, accreditation, continuous professional development, codes of ethics, etc.

For me, as a researcher of mediation, this co-existence of mediation and dialogue facilitation would not have become apparent had war not come to my country. The violent change of government in 2014 and the subsequent armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine brought forward a new type of conflict – socio-political conflict. Imagine a flow of around one million displaced people in your country who spread all over the place, the damages to infrastructure and challenges in humanitarian aid to conflict-affected local communities, as well as simultaneous massive political decentralization reforms focused on the same local communities. All of a sudden, Ukraine was faced with consequences of a massive multi-layered violent conflict that it was not prepared to deal with. Yet, from the very first signs of the crisis, already during Euromaidan mass protests in Kyiv, there were people who attempted to organize talks and to build bridges between various social groups. Who were these people? I found that, having been called by their humanity and personal civil activism, some of them were trained mediators, others trained facilitators, and many had no conflict-related background at all. This was the point in time when the existence of two professional practices – mediation and dialogue facilitation – became visible to me as a researcher.

Having more than 300 hours of mediation training, I was rather curious about the difference between mediation and facilitation. I have jumped into the whole new academic field of conflict resolution (which was rather marginal to me before, when I was preoccupied with court-related and commercial mediation research). Given the scarcity of academic research on the comparison between mediation and dialogue facilitation, I had to dig into the practical world, in particular, through my fieldwork interviews for my postdoctoral research project. As a result, a few differences emerged.

The first distinction came out in terms of overall approaches and brands. In mediation we have arguably four major schools – facilitative, evaluative, transformative and narrative mediation, with

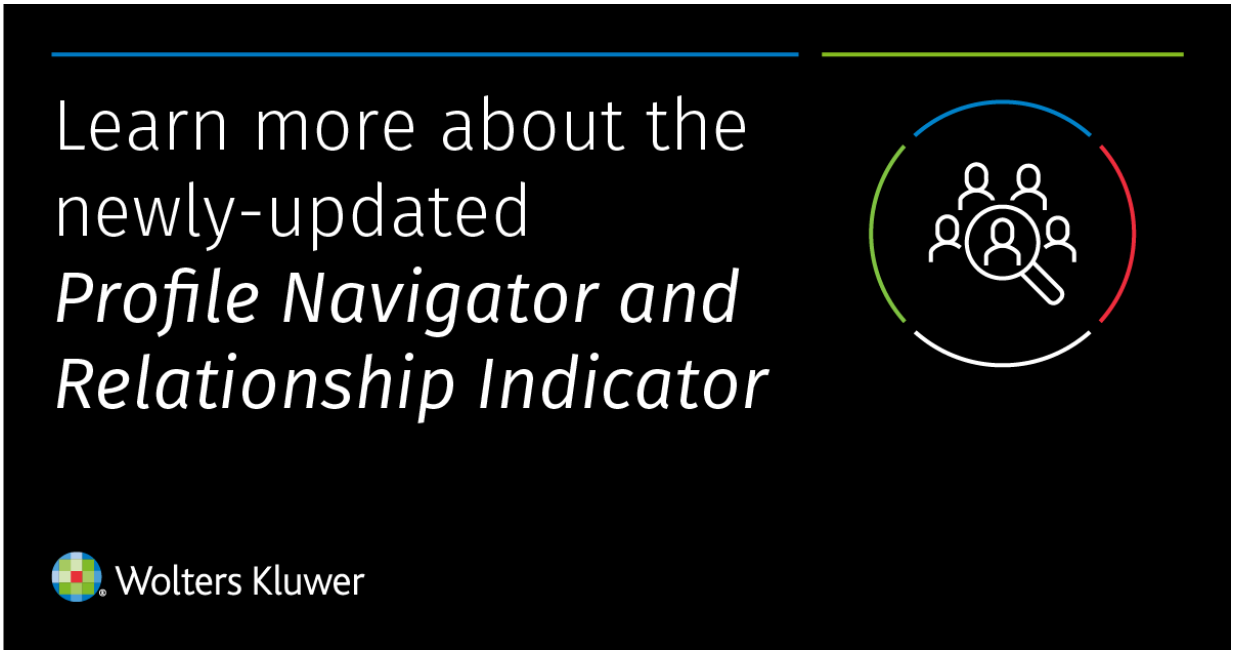
facilitative mediation as a clear mainstream form. In dialogue facilitation there are at least a few dozen equally appealing branded approaches (see for example, UN DESA Partcipatory Dialogue Guide), including those methodologies that have already arrived in Ukraine – ToP, NVC, World Café, and many others. In view of this multiplicity of tools and approaches, when creative practitioners borrow ideas from each other, the conceptual distinction between mediation and dialogue facilitation becomes blurred.

The second distinction refers to the goals of mediation and dialogue facilitation. While mediation, in its mainstream form, is clearly aimed at resolution of the concrete dispute or issues between two or more disputing parties ("problem-solving"), dialogue is primarily aimed at "trust- and understanding-building". Yet, problem-solving may eventually be the outcome of the dialogue, and my research found that (at least in Ukraine) it often does – see the discussion of the "technical dialogues" in Policy Paper "Track III Dialogues in Ukraine". In a similar way, any good mediation always includes talks about relationships (and transformative mediation is only concerned with relationships and parties' empowerment).

Finally, in terms of societal roles, research on Ukrainian mediators and dialogue facilitators has identified two competing sets of ideologies within both communities. While most mediators see themselves as service providers and seek the commercialization and professionalization of their services, dialogue facilitators are more inspired by their role as agents of societal change. At the same time, both orientations are present in both communities, albeit in different proportions.

I am sure there are many more aspects of this comparison between mediation and dialogue facilitation. Yet, even this very general comparison demonstrates that the difference is a matter of emphasis rather than substance.

In a recent meeting between Ukrainian mediators and dialogue facilitators (practicing NVC method), a mediator asked a question: "So, what can facilitators do that mediators cannot?" There was no clear answer to this question and I continue searching for it…



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