

**Researching Practitioner Skills  
In Conflict Resolution:  
Micro Decision-Making and  
Neuro-Linguistic Programming**

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**Working Paper 12**

**Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution  
George Mason University  
August 1996**

**Introduction to  
Micro-Decision-Making  
in Conflict Resolution Practice  
a working paper by  
Andrew Acland**

**Introduction by Michelle LeBaron  
Assistant Professor  
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As a member of an institution concerned with exploring, developing and evaluating processes for resolving conflict, it is a privilege to write an introduction to Professor Acland's paper. As a colleague who has seen his sensitivity and facility in practice, it is an honour. It is one thing to develop and present a set of ideas; it is quite another to apply them in a way that illuminates your own practice and that of others with whom you are associated. This is Andrew Acland's gift.

When Professor Acland came from the United Kingdom as a visiting fellow in 1994, he brought us a wide range of experience in diverse conflicts and a thoughtful analysis of how we are inventing ourselves as a field. His interest in the broad implications for conflict resolution practice of minute-to-minute behaviours stimulated and augmented our thinking. Professor Acland's experience as a developer of the field, an author, and a prominent practitioner contributed significantly to our pedagogy and practice.

In an effort to continue and to extend the dialogues we began, we asked him to write about his experience with Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). NLP, a study of the relationships between cognition, language and behaviour, poses important questions for our development as practitioners, theorists and researchers.

Questions about the evolution of conflict resolution practice and theory are not new. At the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, we have developed an interdisciplinary synthesis of theory from many areas including political science, sociology, international relations, social psychology and law. Much of this work has emphasized the dynamics of large systems and how stakeholders can devise and apply processes to prevent and address conflict.

At the same time, we have long recognized that these deep-rooted conflicts involve people; conflict can neither arise nor be resolved except through individual as well as action. As intervenors in conflict, we know that the complexities of issues, communication and human dynamics make our roles challenging. In analyzing conflict and the intervention role, we have focused on a continuum of processes, not delving deeply into the dynamics of intrapsychic or even the interpersonal dimensions of these processes. We saw Professor Acland's work as important for its contribution to these areas, complementing the work of Joseph Montville, Vamik Volkan, Oscar Nudler and

Chris Mitchell on the interaction of personal conflict processing and large-scale conflict resolution.

As he acknowledges in this paper, NLP has not been widely applied to the study or practice of conflict resolution although the two studies have evolved simultaneously. NLP is only about twenty years old, an outgrowth of the combination of cognitive and behavioural psychology. It seeks to tease apart the complexity of verbal and nonverbal communication in a way that can provide cognitive and behavioural maps of the dynamics involved. To the extent that its principles provide insights into these dynamics, they have far-reaching implications for the analysis and resolution of conflict.

An example used by Professor Acland in his paper contains both the promise and the challenge of this material. He writes of the importance of analyzing language with a full awareness of the context from which the language arises. In personal conversation this means attending to sensory references (body position, breathing rate, tone of voice, etc.) when dealing with a person in a state of conflict. To do otherwise may be unconsciously interpreted as a denial of legitimate emotion. He asserts that we incorporate information and know that we are heard when our senses are engaged. And, the corollary to this proposition is, that if language is used that does not connect to the senses, people are likely to lose the feeling that they know what is being said. The seeds of truth in this statement are intuitive; poets and storytellers have known it for generations. Its implications for training and practice are significant if it helps practitioners and scholars become more effective in dialogue with each other and with those they serve.

The challenges of Neuro-Linguistic Programming for an academic community are several. Controversies continue beyond the bounds of our Institute about its empirical defensibility. Our academic lexicon is full of constructions that are far removed from sensory allusions, challenging us to examine not only our practice, but the way that we write and dialogue about conflict. Even if we take the information on a purely pragmatic level, questions of how to construct appropriate sensory references remain unanswered. Is the use of these devices so central that it should be one of the things balanced by those learning intervention skills along with all of the other process and substance concerns they are mentally holding? Given that this is only one example of many that Neuro-Linguistic Programming offers, how do scholar-practitioners know which of these are most pivotal in improving their practice?

There are many unanswered questions, as Professor Acland acknowledges. At the same time, we thought it important to add this to our Working Paper series because of the questions it poses about information sought and used in analyzing and resolving conflict. This paper reminds us that the stratification of conflict resolution practice into categories (interpersonal, intergroup, international, etc.) is artificial as is the separation of micro- and macro-interventions. The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution was founded on the premise that it is valuable to test ideas in different domains and to let the light of each inform the other.

We print this working paper as an invitation to dialogue and to further work in the important area of raising awareness about the micro-decisions we all make in our roles as scholars and practitioners in conflict resolution.

Michelle LeBaron  
August 1996

## **About the Author**

Andrew Floyer Acland is a citizen of the United Kingdom who is an independent author, lecturer and consultant in conflict resolution. His work is wide-ranging, from developing inner city leadership teams to international conciliation in South Africa. He has authored two books and several articles and manuals on conflict resolution. He is a Master practitioner in Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

# RESEARCHING PRACTITIONER SKILLS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION: Micro Decision-Making and Neuro-Linguistic Programming

Andrew Floyer Acland

*Who would do good to another must do it in minute particulars*

William Blake, *Jerusalem*

## Preface

The purpose of this paper is to present some informal observations and reflections around the subject of *micro decision-making* using as a vehicle the blend of cognitive and behavioural psychology which goes under the forbidding name of *Neuro-Linguistic Programming* (NLP). Micro decision-making describes the minutiae of interveners' behaviour: of what interveners actually *do* moment to moment. Under this broad umbrella can be clustered choice of language, of posture and movement, of analytical focus: how interveners use - consciously or more often unconsciously - their faculties and their physiology. NLP, whose origins and approach is described later, is an appropriate vehicle for exploring the subject because it is based on close attention to human behaviour and on the details of how people influence each other.

The purpose of this preface is to explain why I think micro decision-making should be taken more seriously. Before doing that, it might be useful to place it in context by reviewing some of the challenges which conflict resolution, as a field, is facing. (I use *conflict resolution* as a term to include mediation, facilitation, problem-solving workshops, consensus-building and

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generally all processes which use collaborative rather than adversarial processes, and *interveners* to describe those who endeavour to make such processes effective.)

The literature of conflict resolution reflects the hopes and frustrations experienced by those who seek to practise it. Both hopes and frustrations spill from the Holy Grail of conflict resolution: convincing others - politicians, lawyers, diplomats, police, the population at large - that conflict can be prevented, resolved or transformed without the current flood of blood and treasure. As the world turns, listening fitfully at best, the temptation is to concentrate on the big ideas and seek acceptance for them.

We have largely failed, however, to communicate with those who can most benefit from what we know. For example, the majority of mid-career diplomats who come on the negotiation courses I run for the British Foreign Office not only have little knowledge of the basic principles of conflict resolution: they seem unaware that such a field exists. I have found the same to be true of many of those who are involved, day to day, in neutral UN or CSCE roles. There is evidence for this in the somewhat peculiar conceptions the so-called mediators in former Yugoslavia have had of their role: calling for air strikes against one of the parties, for example, does not accord with my understanding of a mediator's role.

I believe there are two main reasons for the failure of communication between those in the conflict resolution field and those who should be in it. First, with rare exceptions we have failed to find language which dovetails with the experience of those who need the ideas, but which is at the same time sufficiently

distinctive to signal that we have fresh ideas and approaches to offer. This poses a tricky conundrum: we need to demonstrate that we speak the language of our 'clients', while at the same time speaking our own.

Secondly, the 'technology' of conflict resolution has sometimes been difficult to disentangle from the politics out of which it has been born. I believe that too often the technical aspects of the field have been obscured by the political agendas of its advocates. Now, it may be that it is in practice impossible to separate entirely the technology from the context in which it is used, or from the political beliefs of the users: but we should perhaps try harder.

For example, I am always uneasy when conflict resolution is mixed with human rights, partly because I share John Burton's reservations about the entire concept of 'human rights', and because I know from bitter experience that it is very difficult to work with, say, an authoritarian regime if one wants simultaneously to be an advocate for human rights. This is not to say that the concept of human rights is not important, nor that one should always be willing to sup with the devil: merely that the two do not mix. Nor is it to say that conflict resolution should not have a humanitarian or human rights thrust to it - clearly it has and rightly so - but for purely practical reasons it is useful to create some space between its moral and technical aspects. The uncomfortable reality is we have to start from where the 'clients' are rather than from where we are, otherwise the metaphorical baby is liable to be lost along with the political bath water they prefer not to share with us.

Another source of frustration stems from our failure to challenge effectively the adversarial assumption: the belief that the road to resolution must invariably lead first through the dark tunnel of dispute. There will always be situations where the realities of the world dictate adversarial approaches: what major social transformation, for example, has ever come without first some struggle for recognition and justice? But if we can dent the belief that the adversarial way is the only way, then we shall be halfway home, for it is the adversarial assumption which shapes the world to which we have to respond.



Finally, the adversarial assumption gives rise to another factor which inhibits acceptance of the field: fear of conflict itself, whether derived from its perceived destructiveness, its complexities, its embarrassments, or its supposed inevitability. We have tried to address this by directing people's attention to the common dynamics and processes of conflict, the similarities between conflict in different arenas, pointing out that conflict can be positive as well as negative. We try to address conflict as a universal human problem which needs to be approached, like any other problem, with determination and a degree of detachment: separating, as Roger Fisher famously if somewhat simplistically advises in *Getting to Yes*, the people from the problem. It has not worked, perhaps because people are generally unable to make the other crucial separation - between process and content.

Finding credible language in which to talk about conflict resolution; making the technology distinctive yet accessible; mounting a credible challenge to the adversarial assumption; helping people appreciate the underlying connections between conflict in different fields and the consequent need to analyse, to understand, and to separate process and content: these are the critical tasks facing all of us in the conflict resolution field if our ideas are to find their way into the mainstream of social and political life.

These are all 'macro' issues: how can developing the 'micro' skills of practitioners contribute to resolving them? There are several reasons why I believe that filling in the micro blanks could help us to overcome the macro hurdles.

First, while it is the difference in macro approach which produces the paradigm shifts involved in conflict resolution, the macro is the culmination of many differences in micro approach. One of the purposes of this paper is to provoke some reflection on what exactly might be the micro foundations for the macro paradigm shifts, and how might these cumulative micro differences be most effectively expressed in what we do and how we do it.

Secondly, despite all the work which has been done in the field, I feel

























































































































































