

Peter Lemish

# Culture and conflict

## Cross-cultural approaches to conflict management in television programs

**Conflict is produced at all levels of social life, in all cultures, and managed in many diverse ways. Accordingly, there is richness and authenticity in presenting conflict from a cross-cultural perspective that makes it an essential element in all genres of television productions for children, as well as adults, across the world.**

What can we learn from diversity in managing conflict that informs the production of quality television for children? The following conclusions from investigations conducted by Conflict Studies researchers of how conflict is managed in different societies throughout the world offer us a good place to start reflecting on this important question.

**First**, while conflict is a universal social phenomenon, cultures and societies differ in the ways it is managed. The sources of these differences lie in such integral aspects of culture as historic practices, religious beliefs, cultural traditions, social norms and practices.

**Second**, amidst these differences, most cultural approaches to managing conflict include these key elements – emergence of the conflict, non-violent or violent confrontation, negotiation and signing of a hoped-for resolution agreement, agreement implementation, and reconciliation efforts, in some societies. While these elements appear here in linear

order, we know that the process is much more complex and often cyclical (Lemish, 2009), as we see when news reporting or fiction explore the complications in this process ... often with dramatic consequences.

**Third**, colonialism and Westernization spread through globalization as well as through the technological and media revolutions, challenge local traditions and can lead to submission, loss, dominance, accommodation, or adaptation (hybridity) of historic conflict management practices. Grounded in Judeo-Christian and democratic traditions, Western approaches emphasize that conflicts are problems created, managed, and solved by individuals. In contrast, societies guided by collectivist traditions – largely in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East – view conflicts as threatening the social order and seek to restore harmony and honor within and among groups.

**And, fourth**, cross-cultural conflicts can emerge in encounters if persons from different cultures misperceive, misunderstand, or are intolerant of differences in communication, behaviors, and practices. Therefore, many television programs for children have sought to reduce conflict by advancing cross-cultural understanding.

In considering the implications of these conclusions for children's television, we can consider how culture is involved in presenting conflict in a television text.

Media researchers have noted the increasing dramatization of narratives, language, and tone of television

programs. This is especially clear in how televised news aimed at adults has been transformed. This shift is important in our discussion here because conflict plays a central role in the dramatic text. Given this extended use of dramatization, it is interesting to consider how the presentation of conflict in a script may be influenced by cultural assumptions and approaches.

For example, while the roots of the Western approach to conflict-centered drama date to Aristotle, the more recent rendering is known as the "Hollywood scriptwriting formula" (Field, 1992), since it is the key to success in preparing a script for adoption as a film or television program in Hollywood. Stated succinctly, this formula to the dramatic text has a beginning, middle, and end, arranged in 3 acts. Act I: a conflict-centered plot emerges as characters are presented; Act II: the plot evolves through the characters' entanglement in the conflict's web; and, Act III: a crisis emerges with resolution of the conflict occurring near the end of drama, leading to audience tension release. Viewed through the lens of Conflict Studies, this Western approach is driven by conflicts produced through direct interactions between very few individuals; confrontation is the primary phase; resolution usually appears as a surprise (i.e., mediation-negotiation processes are not shared with viewers); and rarely does the storyline continue into implementation of the resolution.

Adding a cross-cultural perspective, we can ask: Would the dramatic form change in terms of script structure, character interaction, plot, management of conflict, and, accordingly, viewer learning about the nature of conflict process – if the story was told through a different cultural approach? From among many possible examples, let us begin with the conflict management practice of *sulha* [peacemaking] practiced in Arab cultures.<sup>1</sup> *Sulha* begins when representatives of an extended family or clan – usually elders and other respected community members – intervene in a confrontation involving individuals when escalation could become very threatening and disrupt social life. Acceptance of the *sulha* process means that retaliation is unacceptable, hence breaking the threatening spiral of confrontation. And, initiation of the *sulha* process changes the tone by calming tensions and assuring that grievances are being taken seriously. The process advances as representatives move back and forth between families. Initially, they come to understand the history of the conflict and the core issues. They use social norms as arguments to mediate or, if unsuccessful, to arbitrate a judgment that insures proper compensation and restoration of honor and social order. Once an agreement is reached, the perpetrator's family hosts the offended families to a festive meal initiated by the elders conducting the reconciliation ceremony that includes presentation of symbolic and material compensation. As noted by Mohammed Abu-Nimer, a scholar of Middle Eastern approaches to conflict management, in the *sulha* process “priority [is] given to people and relationships over task, structure, and tangible resources” (Abu-Nimer, 1996).

A similar, person-centered emphasis is at the core of the Hawaiian resolution process known as *ho'oponopono* [to make right].<sup>2</sup> This process involves internal reflection and external social processes that allow all persons in-

involved in a conflict to discuss, apologize, forgive, and move on with their lives. While the Hawaiian process, like *sulha*, is conducted by elders when there are serious consequences for the collective, more directly related to our interests, *ho'oponopono* is part of the older generations' socializing of the young so that, when 2 or more children quarrel or wrong one another, an older sibling, parent, or grandparent, asks the children to apologize and forgive one another immediately. This brief ceremonial act releases all feelings of burden-

some guilt and restores order or what Hawaiians refer to as alignment with one's ancestors.

To reinforce my claim that richness and authenticity can be achieved by including and learning from different ways of managing conflict in TV programs for children, 2 other examples among many are shared here, briefly. First, due to significant differences in Western and Asian cultural norms, negotiation is the most well studied component of conflict management, largely because it is such an important phase in conducting business transactions. For example, *doh*, the accepted way of behaving in Japan, prescribes how negotiation processes are conducted: First, their negotiating partners' *Wa* [spirit of integrity, reliability, commitment, and humility] is assessed in an initial, informal meeting, usually a dinner, when no talk of business is allowed. Once *Wa* is demonstrated, formal meetings will take place following a strict schedule during which time all the details of the transaction will be obtained as the Japanese participants pose questions and listen attentively and politely to answers – without interruption – so as to maintain the *Wa*. Further rounds of re-questioning will take place, either in the formal setting or through informal discussions. Here the Japanese will focus on details, indicate interests in subtle ways, and/or seek to persuade counterparts. As a collective endeavor, the Japanese work behind the scene to share information and develop tactics.

Once they have attained their goal, affirmed the *Wa*, and insured there is mutual understanding with their negotiation partners, a consensus statement will be presented by the head of the team, with the expectation that their counterparts will offer a discount or reduction (*sabitsu*) to demonstrate friendship and sincerity. And, since *face* is essential, a verbal agreement may be all that is necessary to conclude the transaction.

Finally, the African ethic of *ubuntu* [humanity] that inspired and was the vision of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission [established after the end of the Apartheid regime and functioned from 1995 to 1998] stimulated global interest in reconciliation, in peacemaking and conflict management, at all levels of society. What we learned from this application of the African tradition of *ubuntu* is that we – as individuals and as society – must go through a healing process that includes exposing the history of persecution as well as forgiving those who authorized and committed violent actions.

Now, how would building a script using these or many other cultural practices change the way in which a drama or news story is presented in children's TV? Presenting these practices is authentic both in their physical context as well as in increasing numbers of encounters in multi-cultural societies between veteran residents and immigrants. Including these approaches will add diversity and a whole new range of issues to be explored. And, note, the dramatic appeal of the narrative would not be affected. Indeed, there will be many characters and rich opportunities to develop the intrigue and complications important in a dramatic text. In doing so, *sulha*, *ho'oponopono*, *doh*, or *ubuntu* – driven dramas extend the Aristotelian plot structure of a dra-

matic text by providing more details about the negotiation process, following the story through implementation of the agreement – when a whole new range of issues and problems is likely to merge – and into the important healing process of reconciliation.

By way of closing this introduction to cross-cultural approaches to conflict, I suggest that including various cultural approaches to non-violent management of conflict can add authenticity, diversity, humaneness, and change in programs for children:

- **“Authenticity”**: We can share the many local cultural traditions for managing conflict present in each of our societies and explore issues involved in the cross-cultural encounters that occur daily throughout the world.
- **“Diversity”**: We can include a wide range of approaches to managing conflict. We can reflect on the cultural traditions expressed in our own thinking and creativity, as well as the cultural rootedness of structures we use in producing programs in various genres.
- **“Humaneness”**: We can serve as rich and successful antidotes to violent approaches to resolving conflict in society that are also present in mass media representations. And, in doing so, give voice to the many non-violent, humane uses of managing conflict employed daily by people throughout the world.

- **“Change”**: We can demonstrate that non-violent managing of conflict actually opens up many opportunities to understand others and to develop societies that are tolerant and resourceful in managing conflicts as an essential part of everyday life, throughout the world. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For *sulha*, see: <http://www.sulha.org> and, in particular, <http://www.sulha.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/doron-pely-sulha-article-dispute-resolution-journal.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> For *ho'oponopono*, see: <http://www.ancienthuna.com/ho-oponopono.htm>

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