

Center for Peace Education

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The foundational values and assumptions of current mediation theory and practice in the US are derived from the dominant (white/Euro-American, middle class) culture. In many African American communities, different cultural assumptions, values and norms govern the process of conflict resolution. For example:

I. INTRA-COMMUNAL

Who mediates - The person (or people) chosen to assist disputants in coming to a mutually agreeable solution to their dispute ("mediator") comes from within the disputants' circle of intimates. In fact, the mediator is often chosen for her/his commitment to and level of concern and involvement in the disputants' lives. Outsiders are viewed with suspicion, and many community members hold to the African American adage, "Don't put your business in the street."

II. VESTED INTEREST ("Neutrality" not valued) AND RELATIONALITY

***Who is involved in the mediation** -

A. Elders, by both age and level of wisdom, and other valued community members are often called upon to play vital roles in the successful resolution of interpersonal conflict.

B. All parties involved with the parties are involved in the process, regardless of whether they played a role in the "presenting" dispute.

III. RELATIVITY OF TIME

***Length of time involved** - Successful conflict management is seen as a process, and as such, is given the amount of time necessary for the entire process to unfold. This time may be measured in days, weeks or months. The "It ain't over till it's over" approach.

HINTS FOR EURO-AMERICAN MEDIATORS WHO PLAN TO WORK WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN CLIENTS

*Co-mediate with an African American mediator and de-brief each session with her/him especially in relation to cultural issues. (Remember, your co-mediator will be expressing her/his opinion, he/she is not nor should not be considered the representative of all African communities.)

*Acknowledge at the start of the mediation process that you may unintentionally say or do something "culturally inappropriate." Ask your clients to bring the infraction to your attention as soon as it occurs.

*When decorating your office, purchase magazines, newspapers and books that reflect the various lifestyles of African Americans.

*Ask your clients if there is anything that you need to know or do as a Euro-American mediator that will help the mediation process work better for them as African Americans.

*Ask your clients to clarify any words or phrases that you don't understand, particularly if your clients use Ebonics ("Black English").

*Be aware that in many African communities broad, animated gestures and a strong, forceful voice are considered the norm, and are not seen as disrespectful nor harbingers of violence.