

Victim/Offender mediator training in Germany

German criminal courts include mediation

OVER the past eight years the concept of Victim/Offender Reconciliation (VOR) has achieved dramatic development in Germany. A small circle of committed social workers performed pioneering work in the mid '80s and tested VOR in the juvenile field, ie in criminal offences committed by young offenders. Research was carried out on these projects. The result: VOR has been proved successful. Consequently, in 1990, VOR was included in the Juvenile Court Act of Germany and thus universally introduced. There are now approximately 230 projects in Germany (April 1993) which employ VOR.

To coordinate the explosive development of VOR, the German Federal Ministry for Justice is establishing a Service Office in Bonn. A complex information and training system guarantees that the quality standards of VOR are assured. The Service Office has been offering a one-year in-service course since 1991, for social workers and teachers involved in criminal justice work, under the title "Basic qualification for the conflict counsellor in the field of Victim-Offender Reconciliation". Lutz Netzig describes this course.

Organisation of the Course

VICTIM/Offender Reconciliation is employed in Germany in the most diverse organisational situations. There are projects being run in rural regions, others in major cities. Some projects are being conducted by non-profit-making organisations, others are associated with the social services of the juvenile courts. Many projects concentrate on young criminal offenders, some offer VOR for adult offenders. An effective training scheme must be matched to the diverse working conditions of the mediators.

The target group for the course are those people employed by the public and independent organisations responsible for social services for juveniles, offenders and victims, as well as for the social services of the justice department. The conditions for participation in the training scheme are a completed course of vocational training as a social worker or educationalist, and the

opportunity for the participant to become practically involved in the fields of VOR or conflict mediation.

Working with people and their conflicts demands a strong faculty for observation, good intuitive powers, and flexibility. Such talents cannot be learnt in theory or by following a 'recipe'. They require, rather, a long-term, development-oriented examination of the work of the participant and the problems arising from it.

Mediator training in Germany is orientated towards development and the participant. The intention is to create an optimum learning package for every participant, based on his or her capabilities and specific working situation.

The course is offered non-centrally in various regions of Germany. It lasts for one year and consists of a constant succession of workshops, in which specific capabilities are worked on and practised, and practical placements, in which every participant

applies what he or she has learnt to his or her specific field of work and gains experience with the strategies required for conflict mediation. This covers the development aspect of the course.

General schedule for the course

Workshop I:
Introduction to VOR methodology

Block seminar:
The fundamentals of conflict mediation

Workshop II:
Consolidation of VOR methodology

Workshop III:
Complex interview situations

Conclusion of course and feedback to participants

An additional four days are provided for working groups, to be organised by the participants themselves, for the purposes of reflecting as a group on specific cases.

The concept of the training scheme is designed to incorporate the specific requirements of the participants. Between the individual course modules, the participants write to the team leaders to inform them which topics appear to be the most pressing and important in their daily work. The team leaders, experienced mediators trained in teaching methods, use these specific problems in the course, fulfilling the participant-orientation aspect.

An important part of the training is the encouragement of the participants' own initiative. They should develop structures for regional cooperation and informal case discussions. During the training, participants are expected to draw up case histories and review these with other participants in working groups. *Cont'd over page ▶*

Contents of the training course

During the training, special emphasis is placed on the working out and practice of communication and interview techniques. An additional key area is the clarification of the problems associated with the role of the mediator and the nature of his or her task. The participants' own ability to handle conflict situations and examples of their perceptual capacity are as much a part of the training as the communication of basic knowledge in the areas of victimology, conflict theory, and civil law. Furthermore, participants acquire skills which will enable them to arrange an appropriate organisational framework for a VOR project (setting up of project, cooperation with other authorities, establishment of a victim fund etc).

Methods used for the training course

The principal technique used in the workshops is role play. The participants work on and develop the skills required for conflict mediation in an atmosphere which is as informal as possible. Problematic sequences are repeated and analysed by the group. The role play evaluation is centred on the participants, ie it is concentrated primarily on the perceptions and feelings of those involved in the role play. To reflect on particular examples of behaviour, role play sessions are sometimes recorded on video.

A further method used in training is exercises in perception and sensitisation. These exercises serve to make accessible to the participants the greatest possible information resource on their own behaviour in the mediation discussions and on the reactions of those involved.

A four-day seminar serves to impart basic theoretical knowledge on the one hand, and the exchange of know-how between the participants on the other. Experts give

lectures on the topics of conflict theory, victimology, and civil law. Following that, the participants deal with ways of looking at particular problems relating to these topics in role-playing sessions. Finally, any problems which arise from this are discussed with the experts in question times.

In addition, an "ideas market" is offered. This is a forum for the exchange and cross-linking of the experiences and skills of the participants.

Looking forward

This mediator training course in Germany is now in its third year - nearly 300 social workers have taken part in it. Now, in addition to the basic qualification, supplementary sessions are being offered which are designed to reinforce particular aspects of VOR, eg law, victim perspectives.

The training has a multiplier effect: those completing the course can, in the following year, work as a team co-leaders and then take a group in the next year as a team leader.

At the beginning of 1994 the VOR Service Office will, in conjunction with WAAGE Hannover e.v., carry out a nationwide mediator opinion poll. One aim of this opinion poll is to examine the relevance and utilisation of the training from the retrospective point of view of the course participants. The information acquired will guarantee further optimisation of the training course.

The culture of conflict mediation is still "in its infancy" in Germany. However, commitment to it is growing in the most diverse areas (cf. Tilmann Metzger in *MEDIATION* Autumn 1993, Vol 9, No 4, pages 4/5). Mediation is practised in the context of divorce proceedings. The need for conflict mediation in schools and neighbourhood centres is growing. Managers in industrial companies are being trained in the skills of conflict management. It is now essential to cross-link know-how

from the various fields!

Furthermore, it is important to push ahead the international exchange of experiences. The VOR Service Office is planning an international conference which is intended to be a forum for the cross-linking of the diverse approaches and projects which are occurring in the area of conflict mediation.

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