

---

# Not Good for Your Career

*Christopher Honeyman*

**A**re career pressures stunting adoption-in-practice of the products of dispute resolution research and theorizing? Are they discouraging researchers from making the best use of practitioners' experience? If so, is either of these a significant issue? And anyway, is there really anything anybody can do about it?

To begin to answer these questions, the Hewlett Foundation last year awarded a grant to Mediation Center (Minneapolis) and me to pursue the "Theory to Practice" project, a broad-based attempt to improve the relationship between researchers, theorists, and practitioners of dispute resolution. So far, the project has undertaken a variety of approaches to different aspects

of this problem. Among these initiatives are:

- *A Researcher's Guide to Dispute Resolution Practitioners*,<sup>1</sup> published this month to provide researchers with better access to nearly 80 of the most experienced and most innovative practitioners in the field, in order to encourage getting practitioners' advice when a new research proposal is being prepared;
- a special issue of a professional journal (in process<sup>2</sup>) which juxtaposes the views of scholars who have pursued ethnographic and linguistic studies of mediators at work, in a wide variety of settings, with commentaries by

---

**Christopher Honeyman** has worked as a mediator and arbitrator since 1978, and has written extensively on dispute resolution qualifications and quality control, ethics, and finance. His mailing address is 3142 View Road, Madison, Wis. 53711. He maintains a web page on the Internet, which offers updates on the work described in this column. The address is as follows: [www.execpc.com/~honeyman](http://www.execpc.com/~honeyman).

---

practitioners who work in those settings; and

- three large conference presentations, which have sought to place both researchers and practitioners in roles familiar to them, and to play out the interactions which result. (A monograph condensing the results is in process.)

A common theme has emerged in all of the project's discussions: Despite the rhetoric of our field, many of the roles professionals play in both academia and practice now seem constrained by career issues. Many dispute resolution jobs, in fact, almost seem structured to frustrate the ability of practitioners to adjust practice to new thinking about conflict resolution, while academic careers seem virtually designed to repel efforts by academics to ground new theories and research in the "real world."

In some ways, the mechanics of this depressing equation seem to work differently for researchers and practitioners. In this brief column I shall describe these pressures in terms of the reactions of role players in three simulations which Theory-to-Practice project members Bobbi McAdoo, Nancy Welsh and I organized and presented at three major conferences in 1997. (Our jobs and careers can be a hot-potato subject; the simulation approach is considerably safer than describing any real, actual institution!)

The participants in these role plays — seven to ten for each — included highly experienced and perceptive people from the worlds of negotiation practice and research. (Some were known for their contributions both to practice *and* to research.) Those directly involved, and other colleagues, were canvassed for real-life experiences to use as the frameworks for the three different simulations. They were then asked to improvise their responses, not according to their own forgiving personalities, but according to views they believed typical of colleagues in their respective daily working environments.

### **The Dilemmas**

What pressures for researchers emerged from these discussions?

Some arise, as one might expect, from the twin requirements of the academic world to teach and to publish: We discovered, though, how that particular tension is easily resolved, for some researchers. "I can always cut corners on the teaching" remarked our Ambitious Young Scholar (in character, of course, and apparently eager to write words of wisdom for the ages). Even with such enthusiasm, however, the research requirements alone for such a task can be quite perverse, according to our actors.

While there was distinct pressure to publish, it was apparent from the simulations that the Ambitious Young Scholar, for example, was

---

likely to encounter senior faculty whose narrow ambit of concern favored publishing only in certain journals, and a departmental structure in which there was a system of counting and valuing for tenure and promotion purposes that routinely ignored potentially important forms of publication not already on the department's professional map. These, in turn, led to intense conservatism as to the "acceptable," and rewarded, places to publish.

Our Ambitious Young Scholar encountered withering scorn from senior colleagues as he described the possible publication and other outcomes resulting from a potential new study — one that had significant ramifications for a practice environment. His efforts to get the study to the point where it was deemed acceptable to his department (not to mention financed) led to a progressive metamorphosis of the project; the final, funded version, in fact, promised no chance of addressing the original practitioner-based concerns in any meaningful way.

Meanwhile, status concerns seemed to lead those playing senior faculty in research institutions to demean working closely with practitioners, because the resultant production of what was characterized as "applied" research was portrayed as the province of lesser institutions. Such faculty seemed concerned that anything more than token production of ideas and materials actually found useful by some-

body would reduce the status of the institution involved.

### **Not Just Our Problem**

All of this, you may be thinking, describes problems hardly original to our field. A few weeks after the "Theory to Practice" project started, in fact, one of the best-known figures in the contemporary ADR field sent me an article about the theory-to-practice gap in another profession entirely. The laconic scrawled note accompanying the article asked what was new about the situation dispute resolution researchers and practitioners now find themselves in.<sup>4</sup> And what can be done? Given the prevalence of this problem in other fields, it's all too easy to shrug and answer "Nothing."

But that's not much of an answer. Dispute resolution, more than any other field I can think of, has drawn most of its guiding insights from the clash of different disciplines and different experiences. To pick one among many examples, the book *Getting Disputes Resolved* (Ury, Brett, and Goldberg 1988), which virtually launched the subdiscipline of dispute systems design, probably could not have been conceived without the combination of Stephen Goldberg's background in labor law and arbitration, Jeanne Brett's in organization behavior and management studies, William Ury's in (among other things) finding ways to describe complex negotiation ideas in a highly readable way — and

---

mediator William Hobgood's experience with and acceptability to some of the toughest and most embittered dispute resolution customers around.

The makeup of the Program on Negotiation faculty,<sup>5</sup> the structure and contents of this journal, and the eclectic sources of material for dispute resolution courses at many of the best dispute resolution programs are dependent on interrelationships like these. Furthermore, our field, unlike most fields in academia, has so far been remarkably fast-moving, both in the pace at which it picks up new adherents and in the rate at which ideas change. Even a partial loss of the ability to cross-fertilize simply matters more under these circumstances.

### **The Practitioners' Equivalent**

The role plays revealed parallels in the practitioner world — again, parallels familiar from other professions. There too, the pressure was on to “produce.” But productivity had come to be defined in ways that valued repetition of similar work, not the time-intensive process of discovery. “Innovation” then becomes defined as incremental development of an existing strain of work, while the new forms and methods of practice that could be fostered by thinking about significantly different aspects of casework (let alone research) become de-emphasized or actively discouraged.

Our Bright Young Mediator, for example, found herself virtually

exiled to her firm's equivalent of Siberia when she tried to get management to allow a researcher to look closely at the ethics of some of the attorneys bringing cases there. (In an ironic twist, her subsequent inadvertent disclosure of the study's difficulties to a newspaper reporter caused the firm to put her front and center as the poster child of its concern for professional ethics.)

### **Specializing**

A trend toward narrowing of practice concerns is starting to have real consequences in ADR — a field which up to now has profited greatly from those experienced people who arrived at dispute resolution as an occupation from a dizzying array of subject backgrounds. That diversity of experience, often within a single mode of practice or even a single firm, compelled a healthy debate on which of those experience bases might provide the most convincing and useful strains of professional ethics, qualifications and practice models. One of the consequences of the development of “regularized” firms and public programs is that we are in danger of losing the benefits of a continuing clash of experiences and values.

I think of the career of one of the most broadly knowledgeable and talented neutrals I know, who, a few years back, suddenly abandoned most lines of work to concentrate on a single case area. When I asked why, that mediator said something like “I began to realize that I was encountering competition from

---

mediators who could tell clients they had done a hundred or two hundred of exactly that type of case. I had done more cases of more different kinds, but when that kind of language was used, I started to look uncompetitive in any one area."

At least that practitioner could draw on a rich store of past diverse experience and apply it to the benefit of clients. For those practitioners who are newer and who work within a firm or agency setting, the prospect of maintaining openness to new influences and multiple sources of professional ideology can be daunting. The Young Mediator's "ethics concern" (developed in one of the role plays) reinforced a perception shared by many of the most thoughtful practitioners I have known, that basic reexamination of assumptions and priorities — the very stuff of strategic planning efforts in industry these days — can be viewed in a professional setting as questioning the basis of the firm's or agency's reputation and success. Sometimes such reflection is castigated as time-wasting if not as outright disloyalty.

There are also more insidious consequences. We have seen how in other fields, in the face of an institutionalized opposition to creativity, even somewhat creative people may find themselves losing heart. It's easier, and may even be immediately rewarded, just to reduce one's expectations. This is already visible in the older, more established parts of our field. (A question to the reader who is 45

years old or more, and has worked, for example, with labor-management disputes, the oldest-established part of our field: How many of the eager, bright-eyed people you started your professional life with have become weary time-servers?)

Everywhere we look, professions today contain large numbers of professionals who are dissatisfied with their work, their environment and their prospects — law and medicine being merely two of the best publicized — and look backward to a halcyon age when 'twas not so. If we come to look on the present period of ADR as "the good old days," it will be a demonstration that we have failed in an important way.

### **Pieces of an Answer**

There is little to be gained by faulting individuals for the career pressures I describe, even though most of us who have struggled with these pressures can probably think of a few who seem richly deserving of personal blame. But the pattern is *too consistent*; for us to get anywhere, the pressures must be seen as institutional, not individual. It follows that only institutional counterpressures will have any chance of undoing this institutional picture.

In so diverse a field as dispute resolution and its associated paths of research, what might these be? My honest answer has to be: I don't know, yet. This is one of the things we hope to find out by pursuing the Theory-to-Practice project. But we already have found a couple of small pieces of an answer.

---

One is that assembling cross-subject area and cross-institutional working groups has proved remarkably effective at spurring interesting conversations as well as new directions of investigation — even when the group is deliberately ephemeral. The willingness of even very busy people to join these discussions has been heartening. Encouraging more organizations to form such working groups is one thing this project can and definitely will do. It is possible that such groups may be able to begin to define alternate ways of asserting quality and productivity in both scholarly and practical work in our field.

Another is that there may be “nodes” — points of potential departure which, if they can be identified accurately enough, don’t require a superhuman effort to influence a part of our field. One example is that in developing the *Researcher’s Guide to Dispute Resolution Practitioners* I naturally considered how one might encourage scholars to use such a resource frequently, when it inherently involves a bit of a departure from normal practice and a bit of extra telephoning.

This led to a simple step: Through the cooperation of the Hewlett Foundation, copies of that

document are being provided to the relevant program officer at every foundation we can identify that has ever given any money for research in dispute resolution. The reasoning is that if the grantors know that it’s now easier for a scholar to find a cooperative and expert practitioner willing to double-check a research design, expectations as to what constitutes an acceptable proposal may subtly start to change. Competition among scholars for the scarce research funds available to our field may then encourage them to dot that particular “i” — as they may initially see it. And if those listed in the *Researcher’s Guide* are what I think they are, the discussions that result may prove more interesting to, and take on more significance for at least some researchers than they expected.

These are examples, modest enough so far, of the tactics that may help to create the counter-pressures which alone can stave off a general slide toward being just another way of making an academic or practical living. If you have another one in mind, please let me know, through correspondence with this journal or directly. It will take lots of joint effort to make progress on bridging the gap between scholars and practitioners.

---

## NOTES

1. Copies of this 100-page publication are available for \$6 postage paid from Dispute Resolution Institute, Hamline University School of Law, 1536 Hewitt Ave., St. Paul, Minn. 55104. (Distribution of this document is limited because of the risk of overburdening those listed with "frequently asked questions." So requests for copies must be on academic letterhead.)
2. The summer issue of *Mediation Quarterly* is expected to be given over to this subject.
3. These conferences were the 1997 National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, May 1997; the annual meeting of the Law & Society Association, St. Louis, Missouri, May-June 1997; and the annual meeting of the Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution, Orlando, Florida, September 1997.
4. Recently exhuming my dusty copy of F. M. Cornford's *Microcosmographia Academica* (Bowes & Bowes, London 1908, tenth impression 1978), I was reminded of just how far back these sentiments go: Cornford spoke to the same effect — and *he*, in turn, was quoting Plato. (*Republic*, vi.)
5. The faculty of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School includes scholars who have "made their names" in such traditional disciplines as law, economics, psychology, management, urban studies and planning, and mathematics, among other areas. The Harvard-MIT-Tufts multidisciplinary research center on negotiation was initially funded with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and has served as an organizational model for many of the twenty-odd academic centers on negotiation and conflict resolution that Hewlett has helped to start over the past fifteen years.

## REFERENCES

- Ury, W.L., J.M. Brett, and S.B. Goldberg. 1988. *Getting disputes resolved: Designing systems to cut the cost of conflict*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.