

Peter Lemish

Quality in presenting conflicts

Conflict resolution is at the basis of quality TV

Conflict is an integral part of every fictional programme. A media analysis of PRIX JEUNESSE programmes demonstrates that conflict resolution concepts are insightful for understanding and producing TV programmes.

Conflict is one of the most pervasive, pivotal structures in nearly all media products, as it is in everyday life. Indeed, conflict has been considered to be among the quintessential elements of dramatic structures utilised in fiction and news storylines, and often in non-fiction: “Action in drama depends upon conflict, which is defined as [...] the struggle in a plot that grows out of the interaction of opposing ideas, interests or wills. Conflict is the essence of storytelling; it is the starting point of all drama” (Cowgill, 1999, p. 80). Given that we are well aware that children and young people make extensive use of and learn from media products (Lemish, 2007), it behoves us to examine and to reflect on how conflict is represented in quality texts for these younger audiences.

Conflicts on Screen

Several approaches to the presentation of conflict are utilised in constructing storylines. According to the three act literary-dramatic approach, first conceptualised by Aristotle and more proverbially referred to as the

Hollywood formula, conflict emerges in Act I with introduction of the characters and the expression of their differing desires, often in response to an unexpected situation. The conflict evolves and reaches a climax in Act II, and then is *resolved* – often by dramatic twists – in Act III (e.g. Cowgill, 1999; Dancyger, 2007). Alternatives to this linear structure may employ an open or cyclical storyline in which conflict often remains unresolved. Or, they may probe characters’ inner psychological processes as they deal with a conflict situation and/or as they deal with complications and consequences of living with a compromise resolution agreement.

In the approach most widespread in popular media culture, force and violence are assumed to be the primary means of conflict resolution. This occurs in news accounts as well as in many fiction and non-fiction TV programmes and films. Indeed, this approach has been so successfully imbedded in societies, globally, that many media professionals and consumers understand conflict to be synonymous with violence, as in the news axiom “when it bleeds it leads.”

Although rarely employed, formally, in producing and analysing media texts, Conflict Resolution Studies are, I submit, appropriate, insightful, and rich resources, with important implications for learning by young viewers. This article will demonstrate this claim by sharing how some producers of media for children have incorporated clear conflict-resolution principles

in storylines and character portrayals – two of the key mechanisms for advancing children’s learning about and understanding the social life as well as modelling social behaviour.

Conflict resolution

According to the conflict-resolution paradigm, conflicts are a regular, enduring part of everyday life that occur between family members, friends, colleagues, organisations as well as states when participants discover, express, and act upon differences in needs, interests, desires, attitudes, and/or values. Furthermore, conflict is not considered to be synonymous with violence, historically a poor resolution option; nor is it held that conflicts can be “solved” in a manner similar to automobile repair or treating diseases. Rather, conflict resolution is viewed as an ongoing state of affairs among persons of differing opinions who manage social or political life via processes and mechanisms that can include a host of violent or non-violent action options. Indeed, we know that managing conflicts is an effort that has the potential to contribute to advancement of change and developing relations between individuals and societies in many positive directions, particularly when approached in a tolerant, humane, skilled, and creative manner (e.g. Lederach, 2003; Weeks, 1999). Conflict resolution, then, is a complex social process engaged in by parties over time. The essential phases of

this process are: conflict emergence, confrontation through use of a host of violent or non-violent strategies, negotiation and implementation of an agreement, and reconciliation. While the crisis-driven approach dominant in the Western world often leads journalists and screenwriters to emphasise the confrontation phase, this article will demonstrate that children should be enabled to understand all phases of the resolution process.

Five key principles employed in successfully managing conflicts in everyday life should be applied in developing and analysing the representation of conflict in media texts (Götz/Lemish, 2004; Lederach, 2003; Lemish, 2007; Weeks, 1999):

- Parties to the conflict, and viewers, need to understand the core issues
- Humane, fair presentation of opposing sides' points of view is necessary
- The context and multiple phases of conflict management should be included (cf. Ill. 1)
- Various resolution options should be explored along with a clarification of consequences for adopting Win-Win versus Win-Lose approaches
- 8 key "C" aptitude mechanisms should be employed by the parties: Communication, compassion, compromise, conciliation, continuity, co-operation, creativity, change

Conflicts in quality children's TV

Analysis of TV programmes screened at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL festival identified exemplary films – in various genres, for different age groups, and from different countries – that applied most of these principles and/or utilised informative aspects of conflict resolution (Lemish, 2007; Lemish/Schlote, in print). The *PRIX JEUNESSE Conflict Management Suitcase* contains a rich collection of these programmes, and the few presented here aim to demonstrate how producers worldwide have provided young viewers with opportunities to learn about incorporating non-violent conflict-resolution principles in their own lives.

Non-fiction programmes

In *Fatma* (Egyptian Television & Radio, 2005), the full conflict resolution process is a key structure of the storyline, as

the programme recounts the process of resolving the conflict that began when 10-year-old Fatma's father replied, initially, to her request to begin attending school: "There is no need for you to go to school. You should

look after the livestock, they are the bare essentials of our life [...] beside you are too old to start school."

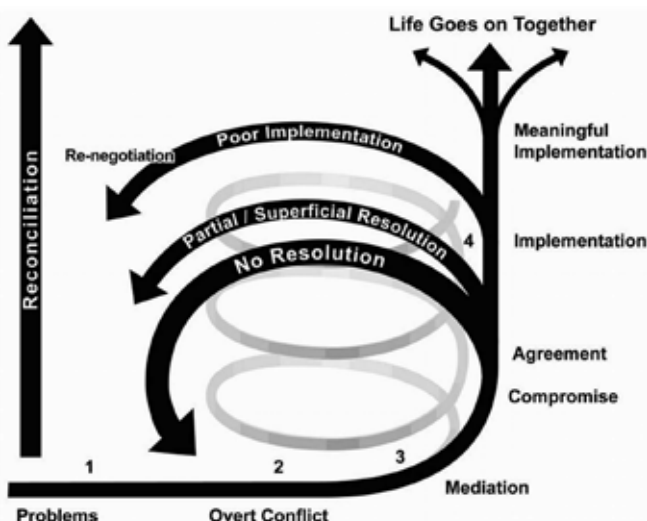
Irreconcilable, Fatma advanced an investigation that enabled her to refute her father's claim, as she found several schools that would ac-

cept her. In the second round of negotiations, Fatma demonstrated her understanding of their power relations and warned him that they are dependent on her work. Though Fatma's account does not share why her father changed his mind, a three-part compromise agreement is reached: Fatma can attend school in the morning, after completing her household chores; she will work in the fields after school and take care of the livestock; and, she must succeed in her studies.

While accounts of conflict resolution processes often culminate with achieving an agreement between the parties, the majority of the storyline in *Fatma* recounts the difficulties she faced in implementing the agreement. Fatma is very tired from travelling to the distant village, attending school, and her after-school work in the fields. As a consequence she has little energy left to complete her homework and she suffers from initial lack of success. However, she re-commits herself, studies hard, and eventually succeeds in winning the praise of her teacher and fellow pupils. Though she is often very tired, she has the satisfaction of upholding her agreement with her father and claims that she is on her way to realising her dream – to become a lawyer so that she can help others.

Different from the situation of everyday conflict recounted in *Fatma*, *People power II – Ruled by kids* (Philippines, 2001) tells the

story of EDSA II – the second successful People's Power non-violent revolt led by Filipino youths that deposed the country's president in January 2001. Viewers are reminded throughout the programme that the *core conflict* was opposition to corruption. In this case, President Estrada was accused of corruption and constitutional abuse. Multiple



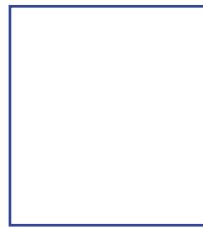
Ill. 1: The cyclical model of conflict resolution (Lemish, 2007)

non-violent methods were applied to resolve the conflict in the *overt confrontation* phase. During the *negotiations*, the protesters rejected Estrada's attempts to obtain concessions that would leave him in power. Three days of rallies in front of the presidential palace led to the president's resignation, but leaders delayed celebrations until the agreement was *implemented*; that is, until Estrada left the palace. Interestingly, at the end of the programme, the teen presenters return to the essential conflict and remind viewers that corruption continues to dominate Philippine politics. Therefore they conclude that there will be a necessity for EDSA III, a third People Power movement.

These non-fiction programmes are exemplary of the use of conflict-resolution principles and processes as strong storyline vectors: There is a clear presentation of the conflict; the differing points of view in contention are presented, fairly, along with a sequential unfolding of four of the key phases of the conflict-resolution process – emergence of the conflict, confrontation, negotiation, and – in these two cases – a focus on agreement implementation. And, we see all of the “8 C” resolution mechanisms.

Fiction programmes

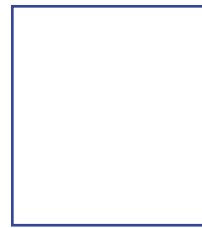
While non-fiction programmes have to meet the measure of truth-rendering, the advantage of fictional accounts is that screenwriters can invent and explore the backstage world of intentionality and personality structure driving characters' interactions, the complexities of social situations, follow the implementation and consequences of various resolution options – all of which can provide viewers with important insights about managing conflicts in social situations. The following accounts of two fiction programmes demonstrate such potential.



In *The magic tree: The scepter* (Poland, 2006) complications implementing an agreement demonstrate the dramatic

richness of exploring this phase in accounts of conflict resolution. The cyclical storyline is driven by the unwillingness of Adam, on three different occasions, to uphold the resolution agreement made with his best friend, also named Adam, that the winner in a coin flip will gain possession of the scepter both desire. A key conflict resolution-related lesson to be learned by viewers from the plot and the first Adam's behaviour is that entering into an agreement in good faith, acting in a trustworthy manner, and full agreement implementation are essential – otherwise conflicts will return to disrupt social life.

Deeper character analysis reveals a number of key differences between the two Adams that contribute to the dramatic plot of this prize-winning programme and the conflict-resolution lessons to be learned. Whereas initially there appear to be horizontal power relations between the close friends, the plot reveals their relations to be more vertical as the Win-Lose aptitude employed by the first Adam drives his transgressions of their agreement. Yet, as the plot unfolds, it is the second Adam who proves to be the most reliable, conciliatory (applying a Win-Win approach), cooperative, and creative, as his resourcefulness and quick-thinking “saved” the boys from their unusual predicament. As a result, the transformative potential of engagement in the resolution of conflicts is demonstrated for viewers, in second Adam's growing self-esteem, empowerment, and the “C” aptitudes he applied throughout the resolution process.



Strong language (Great Britain, 2000), from the series *Off limits*, reinforces the transformative potential of engagement

in conflict-resolution processes and demonstrates another important insight in the resolution process – the need for each party to reflect upon their view of the conflict and to develop their own agency in attempts to resolve the situation. Zoe, a deaf teen, has to deal with the lack of tolerance she encounters as a deaf person in hearing society. The conflict is manifest, initially, in misunderstandings as well as her hearing classmates' mockery, derision, and bullying. Her teacher and even her hearing parents criticise her for not getting along at school. Zoe is frustrated in her attempts to deal with their inability to accept her, blames herself, and feels rejected and alone.

One key transition in the script occurs when Zoe decides to withdraw and to seek the comfort of more tolerant persons (N.B., both unilateral disengagement and taking-a-break, also known as a ceasefire, are common confrontation strategies). In attempting to understand her situation and action options, Zoe learns from her hearing-impaired friend, Ben, about the concepts of “deaf pride” and “deaf culture” that assist her to redefine the conflict and expand it beyond her personal behaviour to be a social problem.

As an intern at a magazine, Zoe is assigned to work with Mark, a deaf graphic artist. Mark tells her how he manages his job and confirms that she is not alone in facing intolerant situations, as he faces them daily as a black, deaf person. He demonstrates use of a common conflict-deflection tactic, humour, when a staff member jokes about their use of sign language and teaches her to use specially designed equipment for the hearing impaired.

The final transition point involves Zoe's deciding to act in a manner that will enable her to problematise her situation for hearing others. To do so, Zoe produces a film and a leaflet about her own and others' experiences with deafness, entitled *This is how I see it*. This becomes a collective social change effort when Ben and Mark surprise her by distributing copies of her leaflet to her classmates. Interestingly, the full resolution process is not included in *Strong Language*. Rather the cyclical storyline proceeds from *conflict emergence* to *confrontation*, back to introspective *conflict analysis*, and then Zoe's re-engagement in the *confrontation* in her attempt to educate her friends to understand their shared social problem. This approach is particularly insightful for young viewers who may be dealing with their own individual social identity-issues. And, in this sense, Zoe is exemplary of the kind of social modelling that research suggests is particularly conducive for pro-active social learning via media products.

Educative potential of resolution-driven programmes

The analyses of these programmes demonstrate that conflict-resolution concepts and principles are insightful for understanding and producing television programmes for young viewers (and adults, too!). In summarising this brief overview, we can focus on several key themes that can be enhanced by being attentive to how conflict and its resolution are presented to young viewers. First, the comprehensive analysis conducted of over a decade of programmes screened at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL festival revealed that very, very few of the films deal with violence and war (i.e., the "conflict as synonymous with violence" approach; Lemish, 2007). And, those that did attend to violent situations were concerned with ena-

bling young viewers understand the consequences of war, particularly in terms of lives of refugees and children in post-war periods.

Similarly, there is very little evidence that producers of quality children's media have adopted the linear, Hollywood, three-act formula that pays scant attention to resolution processes such as mediation, negotiation, agreement implementation, or reconciliation; to say nothing of the real-life, cyclical nature of conflict management. Rather, scriptwriters of the programmes analysed in – particularly fiction – employ cyclical structures as they present characters' developing understandings in different social situations, their interactions with others, dealing with the consequences of their actions, and so forth.

Second, the *educative potential* of programmes, in which conflict-resolution principles are strong, were found to be advanced via two domains that social learning researchers suggest are most conducive for advancing young viewers pro-social learning: plot structure and character portrayal. In this regard, the programmes presented here as well as other programmes included in the *PRIX JEUNESSE Conflict Management Suitcase* advance two important social messages: non-violent social action alternatives exist that enable young people to manage conflicts in their lives; and in doing so they can assume responsibility and advance change desired for their own and others' lives. Indeed, both themes are central lessons that can be focussed upon in media education programmes when discussing the actions of Fatma, Zoe and the Filipino youths in *People power II*. And, even comparison of the Win-Lose versus Win-Win aptitudes of the two Adams in *The magic tree: The scepter* offer important stimuli and insights for discussion with young viewers about the advantages and disadvantages of approaches that can be utilised in managing conflicts in their own inter-personal lives.

And, finally, there are two caveats supported by research about enhancing learning about complicated social processes, such as conflict resolution and transformative social action: first, *serialisation* should be adopted as it allows for repetition and expansion of social processes and as well enables viewers to observe character development overtime and the consequences of actions. Second, since it is very difficult to attain deep understandings of complex social processes, media and social education programmes should include conflict-resolution concepts and principles when analysing storyline and character development. ■

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THE AUTHOR

Peter Lemish, Ph.D., is an educational activist and independent researcher. He conducts *PRIX JEUNESSE Conflict Suitcase* trainings.

