

**The Mediator's Discipline: Restoring Fullness in Flattened Relationships**

Bryan D. Stafford

V10- June 2026 Revision

© 2024 | © 2025 | © 2026 Bryan D Stafford

### Abstract

Conflict flattens people. The moment a relationship becomes a dispute, the parties stop being multidimensional persons and are compressed into single functional roles: debtor, plaintiff, betrayer, victim, or opposing party. This compression operates at five interlocking levels: cognitive (schema narrowing and ego-defensive attitude formation), neurobiological (autonomic dysregulation and contracted windows of tolerance), narrative (each party recasts the other as a two-dimensional character in their own story), relational (older family-systems and attachment patterns reactivate), and cultural (the *social imaginary* the parties once shared collapses). Agreements signed without addressing this compression tend to fail. The mediator's central task is therefore not procedural management but a *discipline of restoring fullness*. It is a sustained, formed posture that resists the flattening effect of conflict on perception, in the mediator herself and between the parties. This paper integrates role theory, symbolic interactionism, social-identity research, trauma-informed and interpersonal-neurobiological perspectives, Bowen family systems, Karpman's Drama Triangle, and Choy's Winner's Triangle, attachment theory and Emotionally Focused Therapy, Adlerian psychology, Taylor's social imaginary, the conflict-transformation tradition, Nonviolent Communication, emotional-intelligence research, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Person-Centered theory, Hegelian dialectics, and Confessional Lutheran anthropology. In a single image carried through the paper, the discipline is the work of helping every person in the room move from a position in Karpman's Drama Triangle (Persecutor, Victim, Rescuer) to the corresponding position in Choy's Winner's Triangle (Challenger, Vulnerable, Caring), a movement that is itself a Hegelian *Aufhebung* (a "lifting up" that cancels, preserves, and elevates both poles at once) applied to a relational triangle.

*Keywords:* mediation, conflict transformation, Drama Triangle, family systems, attachment, dialectics, vocation

## **The Mediator's Discipline: Restoring Fullness in Flattened Relationships**

### **Introduction: The Problem of the Flattened Other**

A central but undertheorized fact about conflict is what it does to perception. When two people enter a dispute, each begins almost immediately to see the other less fully. The other person's many roles, histories, motivations, vulnerabilities, and gifts contract. What remains in view is the role each plays in the dispute itself: the unreliable contractor, the unreasonable client, the spouse who broke trust, the employee who underperformed, the parent who was absent. Settlement-oriented mediation literature has long noticed the symptoms of this contraction (entrenched positions, moral certainty, the language of betrayal) and has developed techniques for working around it (Fisher et al., 2011; Moore, 2014). What that literature has been slower to name is the underlying phenomenon. People in conflict do not merely disagree about what happened. They have begun to see each other *flat*, as two-dimensional characters in the story each is now telling, no longer three-dimensional beings with accessible interiors.

This flattening operates not only within individual cognition but also at the level of the social imaginary (Taylor, 2004). This is the shared, mostly unspoken picture of how marriage, work, partnership, or family is supposed to function. A dispute is, in part, the simultaneous collapse of that shared picture and of each party's perception of the other as someone who still inhabits it.

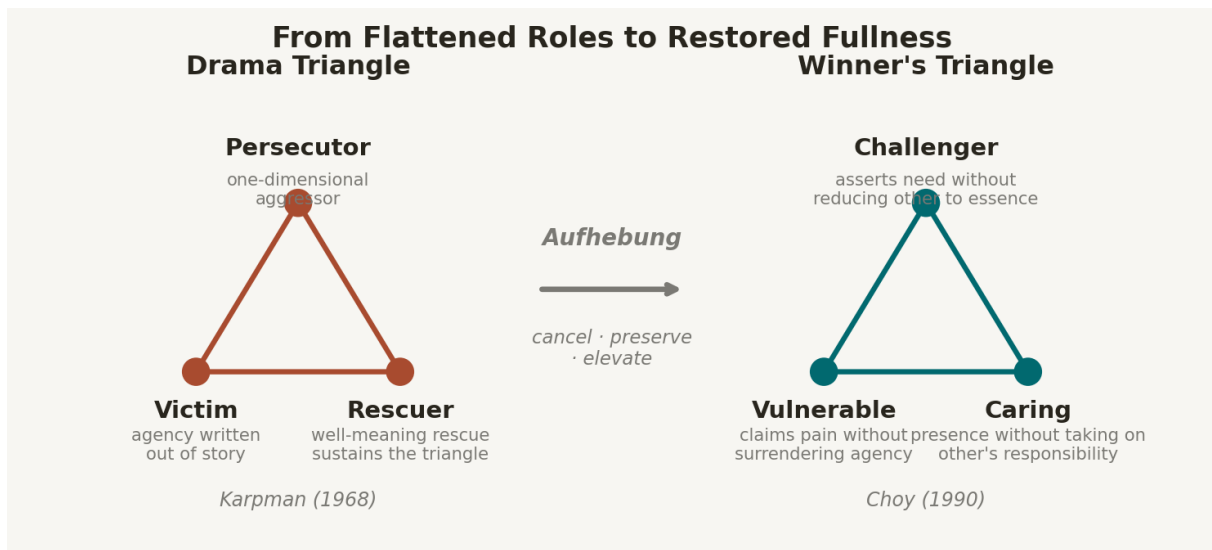
This paper takes that observation as its starting point. The argument is that conflict produces a recognizable cognitive and relational pathology (the flattening of the other into a single, dispute-defined role) and that the mediator's central task is to resist that flattening, in herself and between the parties, until each can again hold the other as a person of irreducible depth. This is what I call *the mediator's discipline*. It is a discipline in the older sense: a

sustained, formed posture rather than a technique. It has procedural and interior dimensions. It draws on traditions not usually placed in conversation with one another, and it rests on an anthropology (implicit in role theory, explicit in Confessional Lutheran theology) that human persons are never reducible to the part of them currently in view.

In a single compact image, developed in this paper, the discipline is the work of helping every person in the room (both parties and the mediator herself) move from a position in Karpman's (1968) Drama Triangle (Persecutor, Victim, Rescuer) to the corresponding position in Choy's (1990) Winner's Triangle (Challenger, Vulnerable, Caring). That movement is the structural form restoration of fullness takes inside a three-party system under stress.

**Figure 1**

*From Flattened Roles to Restored Fullness: The Drama Triangle and the Winner's Triangle*



*Note.* The Drama Triangle (Karpman, 1968) collapses each participant into a single role; the Winner's Triangle (Choy, 1990) restores multidimensional personhood. The mediator's discipline is the movement from left to right, structurally a Hegelian *Aufhebung*: cancellation, preservation, and elevation of both poles into a livable synthesis.

The paper unfolds in a series of movements. It opens with the phenomenology of flattening, drawing on role theory, symbolic interactionism, the cognitive science of categorization, and the trauma-informed and interpersonal-neurobiology literatures. From there, it argues that settlements reached without addressing the flattening do not hold. That account is grounded in attitude theory and the conflict-transformation tradition. A subsequent section examines the family-systems, attachment, individual-psychology, and social-imaginary roots that make flattening so reflexive in close and long-running relationships. The paper then turns to procedural discipline, describing the practices that restore fullness, before taking up the mediator's interior life through the ACT hexaflex, DBT's radical acceptance and wise mind, emotional intelligence research, Siegel's Window of Tolerance, and Person-Centered congruence. A further section names the dialectical logic that animates the whole (Hegelian rather than Marxist) and another names the theological anthropology that, for a Confessional Lutheran practitioner, sits underneath the work. The paper closes by returning to the Drama-Triangle-to-Winner 's-Triangle image as a summary of the whole.

A word on the genre and scope of what follows. This paper is a conceptual and integrative framework rather than an empirical study; its claims are theoretical and practice-based, and they are offered as exploratory rather than as tested hypotheses. It therefore differs in kind from empirical trauma-informed interventions whose effects have been measured in controlled designs (Kelly & Garland, 2016; Kuhar et al., 2024) and from empirical and autoethnographic studies of mediator development and workplace mediation that document inner change through systematic data (Wong, 2025). It is closest in spirit to Shapiro's (2010) relational identity theory, which likewise treats the emotional and identity dimensions of conflict as primary and theorizes a *tribes effect* in which rigidified identities drive escalation, and to

accounts of mediation as a site where identities and norms are reconstructed rather than merely settled (Clowry, 2023). Where relational identity theory was developed largely for intergroup and international conflict, the present framework works at the scale of the interpersonal mediation table, naming the perceptual mechanism (flattening) and the disciplined posture by which a third party resists it.

### **The Phenomenology of Flattening**

Sociology has been describing the architecture of roles for nearly a century. Linton (1936) distinguished *status* (the position one occupies in a social structure) from *role* (the behaviors expected of someone in that position). Parsons (1951) extended this into a theory of normative role expectations, and Merton (1957) added the *role-set*: the constellation of role-partners attached to any single status. A father has a role-set that includes a child, a spouse, sometimes parents, in-laws, coaches, and teachers who see him through that one lens. A manager has a role-set that includes direct reports, peers, supervisors, customers, and vendors. Each partner in that set sees one role, not all of them.

Symbolic interactionism sharpens the point. Cooley (1902) described the *looking-glass self* (the self we come to know through how we appear in the eyes of others), and Mead (1934) developed this into a theory of multiple "me's," each elicited by a different relationship. Goffman (1959) carried the analysis into the dramaturgy of everyday life: we are always performing, the performance shifts with the audience, and none of those performances is fraudulent. They are partial expressions, faces turned toward particular audiences. Solomon (2024) condenses the same idea for the consumer-behavior classroom: the self has multiple role identities, only some of which are active at any moment, and each role has costumes, props, and scripts. This is ordinary life. Under conflict, it becomes pathological.

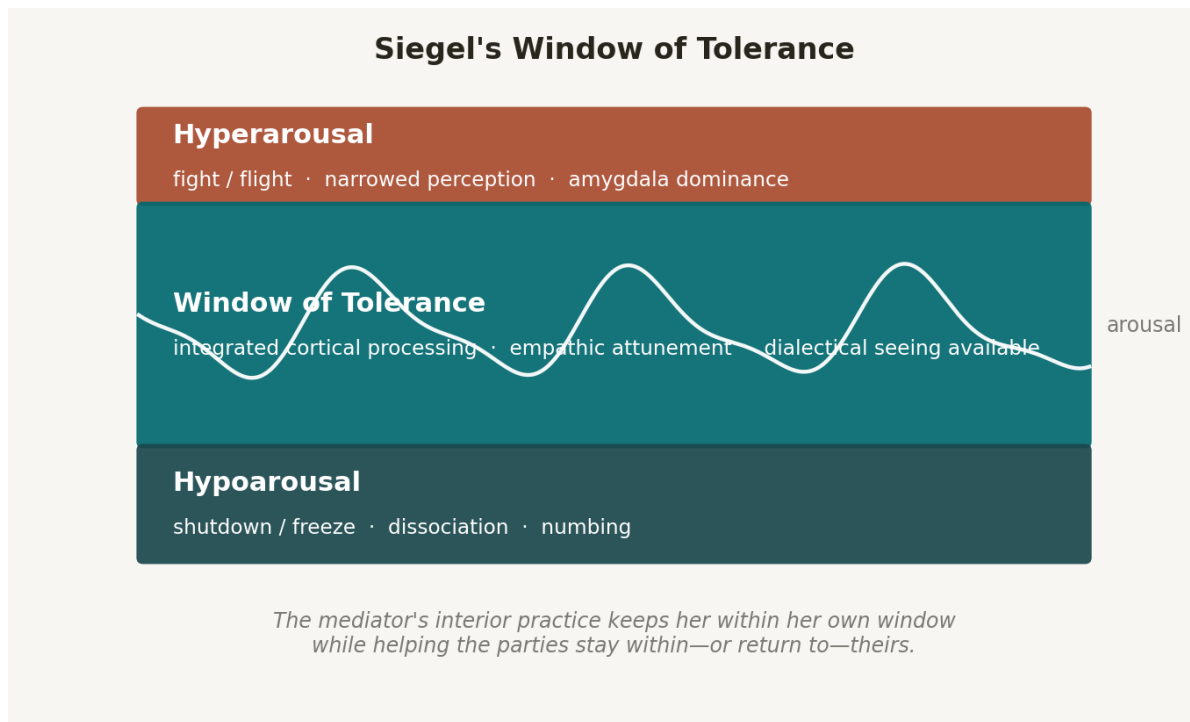
What conflict does, in this lens, is a *category-narrowing*. The role-set collapses to one role, the role-in-the-dispute. The other person's other faces (parent, neighbor, congregant, employee, friend, colleague) do not disappear in reality; they simply fall out of the perceiver's field of view. The cognitive science of social perception explains why this happens so quickly. The human mind is a categorization engine (Fiske & Taylor, 2013): confronted with the impossible task of treating each encounter as wholly novel, we reduce one another to schemas, scripts, and stereotypes. Kahneman (2011) names the System 1 process that does most of this work: fast, automatic, low-cost. During conflict, the machinery does not turn off; it simply operates under a more impoverished schema. The other becomes an instance of the role that hurt me.

Attitude theory adds another layer. Katz (1960) identified four psychological purposes attitudes serve: utilitarian, value-expressive, knowledge, and *ego-defensive*. The ego-defensive function is decisive in conflict. Once a person experiences another as threatening (to interest, identity, status, or self-image), attitudes toward that other are increasingly recruited to defend the self. The flattened image is not only a cognitive shortcut; it is a psychological resource that protects the self from the more complicated truth that the person across the table is, in fact, a full person whose grievance may be in some measure justified. The Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) explains the downstream consequence: behavioral intentions toward the other are formed from these flattened attitudes plus the perceived expectations of one's reference group, and the resulting behavior tends to confirm and entrench the flattening.

Social identity theory adds yet another (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Once a conflict acquires a *we* and a *they*, in-group favoritism and out-group homogenization activate. The opposing party is no longer an individual with a grievance but a token of an out-group whose members are

perceived as more similar to one another, and more different from the in-group, than they actually are.

Beneath the cognitive and attitudinal layers sits a neurobiological one. Interpersonal neurobiology has shown that perception under threat operates within a *window of tolerance*, the range of arousal in which integrated cortical processing remains available (Siegel, 2012). Outside that window, in hyperarousal (fight/flight) or hypoarousal (shutdown, freeze), perception narrows, the amygdala dominates, and the prefrontal cortex's more nuanced social processing becomes intermittent or unavailable. Schore (2003) describes this as a failure of *affect regulation*: the right-brain systems that normally read another's emotional state with accuracy lose resolution when the relational environment feels unsafe. This autonomic register is not merely descriptive: body-based, polyvagally informed interventions have been shown to shift interoceptive awareness and autonomic reactivity in conflict-affected populations, even where harder attitudinal change lags (Kuhar et al., 2024). This is evidence that the window of tolerance is a workable point of intervention and not only a metaphor.

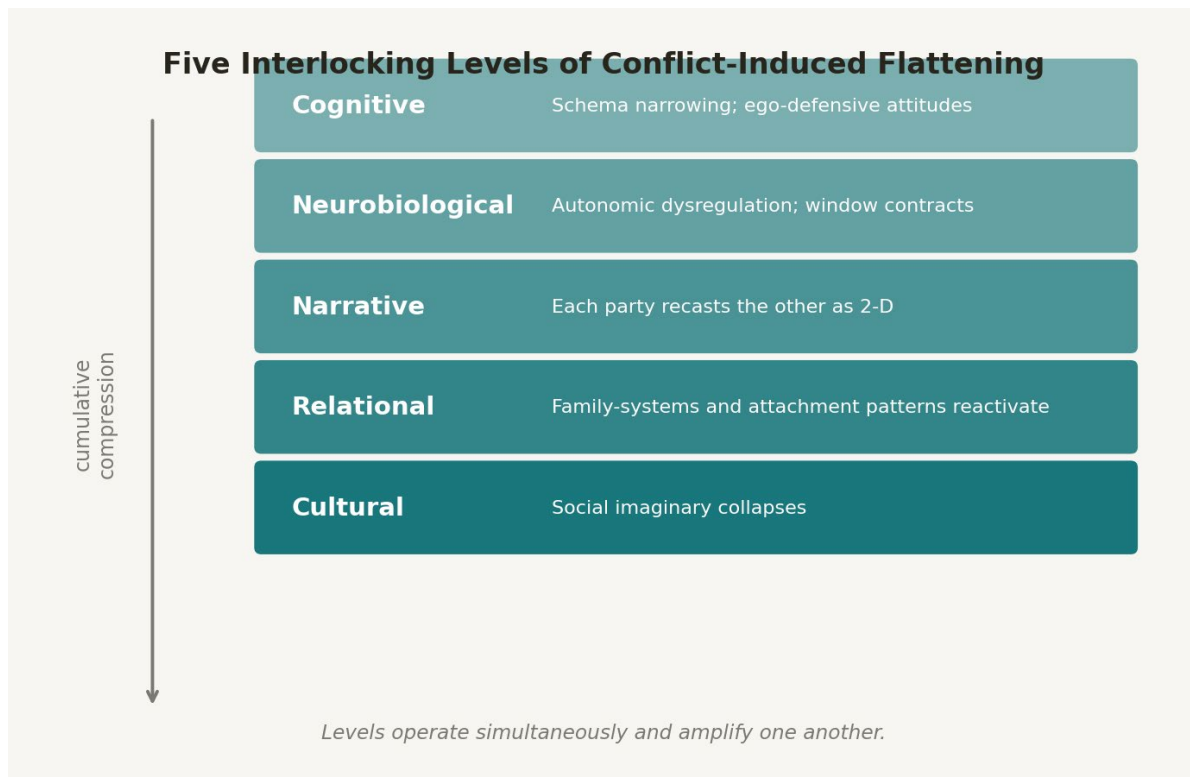
**Figure 2***Siegel's Window of Tolerance*

*Note.* Within the window, integrated cortical processing supports empathic attunement and dialectical seeing. Outside the window (in hyperarousal or hypoarousal), the more sophisticated social processing necessary for non-flattened perception becomes intermittent or unavailable. Adapted from Siegel (2012).

Trauma history complicates the picture further. Van der Kolk (2014) and Herman (1992) document how past traumatic experiences leave perception persistently primed for threat, narrow the field of relational possibility, and substitute survival schemas for situational appraisal. A party arriving at mediation with a relevant trauma history is not arriving with a clean perceptual apparatus that the conflict has temporarily compromised. They are arriving with a system already configured to flatten the other into the shape of an earlier threat. This is not a moral failure on the

party's part. It is a feature of the equipment, and the mediator who understands it will not waste energy interpreting the resulting flattening as bad faith.

The composite picture is this. Conflict triggers a cascade: category narrowing, schematic compression, ego-defensive attitude formation, in-group/out-group sorting, autonomic dysregulation, and (where trauma is present) the activation of older survival schemas. This cascade operates almost entirely below conscious awareness and produces a perceiver who can no longer see the other as the multidimensional person they were before the dispute began. This is the flattening. Naming it as a phenomenon, rather than treating only its symptoms, is the first move of the mediator's discipline.

**Figure 3***Five Interlocking Levels of Conflict-Induced Flattening*

*Note.* The flattening operates simultaneously across cognitive, neurobiological, narrative, relational, and cultural layers. Each layer reinforces the others; intervention at only one level rarely restores fullness.

### **Why Settlement Without Fullness Is Unstable**

Experienced practitioners report a familiar pattern: an agreement is reached, sometimes elegantly, and then collapses within weeks. Post-mortems usually focus on the agreement itself: too vague, too aspirational, and/or insufficiently specific. The diagnosis is correct as far as it goes. Vague agreements do predict relapse. But the deeper diagnosis is that the agreement is being asked to carry weight that the parties' perception cannot support. The page is signed by people who still see one another flat.

The attitude-behavior literature predicts this. Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action holds that behavior follows intention, intention follows attitude and subjective norm, and attitude is in part a function of belief about the object, including beliefs about the other party. When the underlying beliefs about the other remain flat, the attitude remains hostile, the intention to honor the agreement remains weak, and the behavior drifts. What looks at the table like *agreement* is, in fact, *compliance under structured pressure*. Compliance is not commitment, and the distinction Kelman (1958) drew long ago (between compliance, identification, and internalization) is exactly the distinction at stake.

Moore's (2014) Circle of Conflict supplies diagnostic vocabulary. Conflicts present along five dimensions: data, interest, relationship, structural, and value. Settlement-oriented mediation tends to work the interest and data dimensions, because those are where positions can be unbundled into needs and resources reallocated. But relationship and value conflicts rarely reduce cleanly to interests. A relationship conflict in which one party still sees the other as wholly defined by the offense will reproduce even when the immediate dispute is resolved. The interest agreement papers over an unaddressed relational reality. The agreement is held for a few weeks; then a triggering event reactivates the flattened image, and the parties are back where they started.

Fisher, Ury, and Patton's (2011) classic distinction between positions and interests is essential here but insufficient. Surfacing the interests beneath the positions loosens the grip of the position and opens space for creative options. But interests live inside persons, and persons in conflict are not the persons they will be when the conflict is resolved. The interests we elicit at the table from a flattened version of the other are a partial map. The agreements we build on that map are correspondingly partial. Bush and Folger's (2005) transformative-mediation literature

gestures at this when it speaks of *empowerment* and *recognition* as the deeper goods mediation makes possible. But the language of recognition is often left abstract. *Recognition*, in this paper's vocabulary, is precisely the restoration of multidimensional perception: the moment one party sees the other as more than the role the dispute has assigned. Without that, the agreement is structurally unstable, however elegant its drafting.

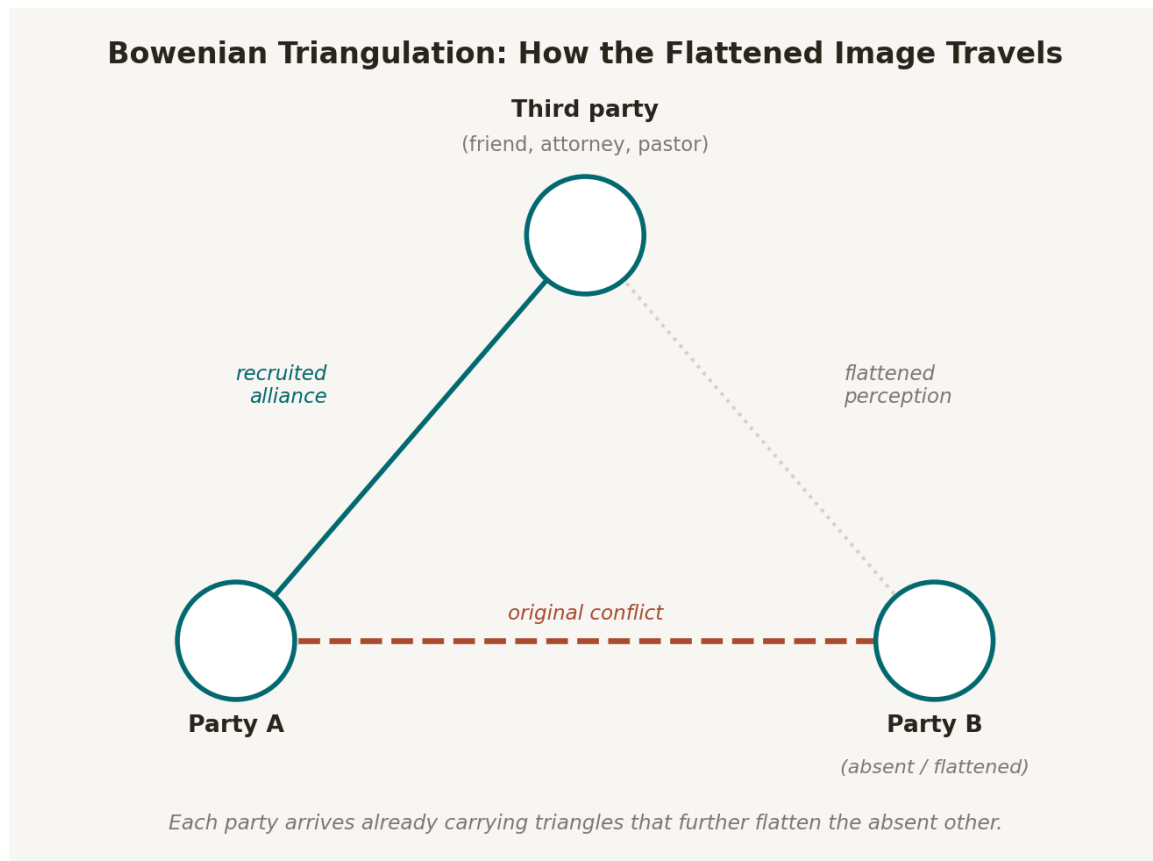
The conflict-transformation tradition, developed most extensively by Lederach (2003, 2005), makes a stronger version of the same claim. Lederach distinguishes *conflict resolution* (oriented to settlement of the immediate dispute) from *conflict transformation* (oriented to the underlying relational, structural, and personal patterns that produced the dispute and will produce others like it if left unaddressed). Transformation requires *moral imagination*: the capacity to envision a relationship that does not yet exist, to risk constructive engagement with one's adversary, and to hold paradoxical curiosity about a future the past has not predicted. Moral imagination is the cognitive correlate of restored fullness. It is what the parties become capable of when the flattening lifts. The agreement that holds is reached by people who have, at least briefly, exercised moral imagination toward each other.

Mayer (2004, 2012) presses the point. In *Beyond Neutrality* and *The Dynamics of Conflict*, he argues that the field's overemphasis on settlement has produced practitioners better equipped to close cases than to engage the emotional, identity, and power dimensions of the conflicts they close. Mayer's preferred frame is *engagement* rather than *resolution*: in difficult cases, the mediator's job is less to extract an agreement than to help the parties engage their conflict more competently, including the possibility that engagement leads to a deeper recognition of what is and is not negotiable. Cloke (2001, 2006) develops a parallel argument with a more transformative inflection: conflict, viewed rightly, is an opportunity for growth, and

the mediator who treats it as such enters the room oriented to shame, fear, resistance, forgiveness, and emotional healing rather than to settlement alone. This paper sits inside the Lederach-Mayer-Cloke tradition without collapsing into it. Restoration of fullness is what those traditions are pointing at when they speak of transformation, engagement, and growth; this paper names the underlying perceptual move so that the procedural and interior practices that aim at it can be described with more precision.

### **Family Systems and the Roots of Relational Flattening**

Flattening is reflexive in close and long-running relationships because the relational systems we inhabit were already organized around partial seeing long before the dispute arrived. Bowen's (1978) family-systems theory offers the most developed account. The family is, for Bowen, an emotional unit characterized by varying degrees of *differentiation of self*, the capacity to maintain a separate sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to others. In families with low differentiation, members are highly reactive to one another's emotional states, and conflict between any two members tends to recruit a third (*triangulation*). The triangle stabilizes anxiety, but at the cost of distorting perception: the third party now perceives one of the original two through the lens of the other, and the original conflict is exported into the triangle rather than resolved within the original dyad.

**Figure 4***Bowenian Triangulation and the Travel of the Flattened Image*

*Note.* When a dyadic conflict recruits a third party, the absent other is increasingly perceived through the lens supplied by the present alliance. Each party arrives at mediation already carrying triangles that have further flattened the absent other.

Three Bowenian observations have direct procedural implications. First, parties at the table almost always arrive carrying triangles. Each party's narrative has been rehearsed and reinforced with sympathetic third parties (friends, family, attorneys, pastors, colleagues), and that rehearsal has further flattened the absent other. The mediator is, in part, working against the cumulative effect of these triangles. Second, *emotional reactivity* in the room is contagious; Bowen argued that the most differentiated person present sets a ceiling on the system's

functioning. The mediator's own differentiation (her capacity to remain non-reactive while connected) is therefore not a personal style preference but a structural feature of what makes the process workable. Third, the *multigenerational transmission* of relational patterns means the dispute on the table is rarely only about that dispute. The way a divorcing couple fights over a parenting plan often echoes how each of them was parented, and the way two business partners flatten one another often echoes how authority was held or contested in their families of origin. The flattening at the table is layered over older flattenings.

Karpman's (1968) *Drama Triangle*, developed within the transactional analysis tradition, provides Bowenian triangulation with its phenomenological grammar. Where Bowen describes the structural fact of three-party emotional systems, Karpman describes the *roles* the three parties occupy within those systems under stress: *Persecutor*, *Victim*, and *Rescuer*. Each role is, in this paper's terms, a flattened role. The Persecutor is the one-dimensional aggressor whose behavior is read as essence ("he is impossible"). The Victim is the one-dimensional sufferer whose agency has been written out of the story. The Rescuer is the one-dimensional helper whose well-meaning intervention sustains the triangle by treating the Victim as incapable. People rotate through the positions (today's Victim becomes tomorrow's Persecutor; today's Rescuer becomes tomorrow's Victim when the rescue is rejected), but the rotation does not dissolve the triangle. It maintains it. Conflict is the classic activator of the Drama Triangle, and parties typically arrive at mediation already cast, by themselves and by their triangulated supporters, into one of the three positions. Although the Drama Triangle has been comparatively neglected in family-therapy theory, L'Abate (2009) argued that it remains a clinically powerful model of pathogenic relating that deserves resurrection. This is part of the warrant for building the present account on it.

The Drama Triangle matters procedurally for two reasons. First, the triangle is *itself* a flattening structure. None of the three roles preserves the full personhood of the one occupying it. The Victim cannot be both wronged and accountable at the same time; the Persecutor cannot be both responsible for harm and contextually understandable at the same time; the Rescuer cannot be both helpful and respectful of the other's agency at the same time. The triangle organizes perception so that both/and of full personhood becomes structurally unavailable. Second, the triangle is *contagious*. The mediator is at particular risk of being recruited into the Rescuer role, especially when one party presents with strong Victim affect and clear material grievance. The Rescuer position feels, from the inside, like compassion; from outside the triangle, it confirms the Victim's flattened self-perception and the Persecutor's externalized blame, while quietly assuming the Victim cannot act on their own behalf.

Choy's (1990) *Winner's Triangle* names the structural alternative triangle of restored fullness. The Persecutor position can be reoccupied as *Challenger*: a person who asserts a legitimate need or boundary without reducing the other to an essence. The Victim position can be reoccupied as *Vulnerable*: a person who articulates pain and limitation honestly without surrendering agency. The Rescuer position can be reoccupied as *Caring*: a person who offers presence and resource without taking ownership of the other's responsibility. Each Winner's Triangle pole preserves the multidimensional personhood that its Drama Triangle counterpart had collapsed. Importantly, the Winner's Triangle has the same structural shape as the dialectical both/and developed in the sections below on the mediator's interior life and Hegelian dialectics: the Vulnerable position holds *wronged and still an agent* simultaneously; the Challenger holds *asserting and still respectful* simultaneously; the Caring holds *compassionate and not co-dependent* simultaneously. The Hegelian *Aufhebung*, the operation that cancels, preserves, and

elevates both poles of a contradiction into a higher synthesis, operates here too. Nothing is discarded; both poles of each apparent contradiction are preserved. The Winner's Triangle is, in effect, the Drama Triangle *aufgehoben* (lifted up into a livable higher integration). The lineage from Karpman through Choy into applied professional practice is by now well established: McKimm and Forrest (2010), for instance, deploy both triangles to help clinical supervisors move trainees out of Drama-Triangle dynamics and toward the Winner-Triangle positions, an applied use directly analogous to the mediator's work described here.

Adlerian individual psychology supplies a complementary lens (Adler, 1927/2010; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). For Adler, each person develops a *style of life* organized around early decisions about belonging and significance, and a *private logic* that interprets new events through that pre-existing organization. Conflict activates the private logic. The other party is reading through the perceiver's earliest answers to the question, "Am I welcome here?" and *am I capable?* These are answers formed in the family constellation. Adler's concept of *social interest* (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, literally "community feeling") is the corrective: the developed capacity to perceive the other as a fellow human whose well-being is interwoven with one's own. Where social interest is well developed, flattening is partial and recoverable. Where it is underdeveloped, the perceiver cannot easily see the other as anything other than an instance of an old threat. Adler's clinical posture of *encouragement* (directly opposed to discouragement, which produces the contracted self that perceives the world as hostile) anticipates what the mediator does at the table.

Satir's (1972) work on communication stances adds an embodied dimension. Under stress, people adopt one of several survival stances: *placating*, *blaming*, being *super-reasonable*, being *irrelevant*, or *leveling* (the congruent stance). Each non-congruent stance flattens both self

and other: the placater erases the self, the blamer erases the other, the super-reasonable erases both into procedure, the irrelevant erases the conflict itself. Only the leveling stance preserves the fullness of self and other. Satir's framework gives the mediator a vocabulary for gently naming what each party is doing communicationally, and an aim, in leveling, that aligns with what Rogers (1961) called congruence and what this paper calls the restoration of fullness.

Attachment theory, originating with Bowlby (1988) and clinically developed by Johnson (2019), provides a deep layer. Bowlby's foundational insight is that human beings are wired from infancy for proximity-seeking toward attachment figures, and that the working models of self and other developed in early attachment relationships persist into adult relational life as default templates. Under threat (and conflict is, neurobiologically, a threat), those templates activate. The party that reads the other as cold and rejecting is, in part, reading the room through an internal working model that predates the dispute by decades. The party who experiences the other's withdrawal as abandonment is responding from an attachment script, not only from the situation.

Johnson's (2019) Emotionally Focused Therapy framework operationalizes this in a way directly translatable to mediation. EFT identifies a recurring conflict cycle: an attachment fear (of rejection, abandonment, irrelevance, inadequacy) is activated; the activated person responds with a *secondary* emotion (usually anger or withdrawal) that protects the *primary* attachment-level vulnerability; the partner reads the secondary emotion as evidence of hostility or indifference and responds in kind. The cycle becomes self-sustaining: each party's protective behavior triggers the other's attachment alarm, and neither sees the underlying vulnerability driving the surface presentation. In flattening terms, EFT describes a particular pathway by which two persons reduce each other to their secondary emotional presentation (the angry one,

the withdrawn one) and lose access to the vulnerable selves actually in the room. For the mediator working with families, divorce, or close business partner disputes, this is critical. The Persecutor of the Drama Triangle is often, attachment-wise, a Vulnerable person whose protective anger has done the only job it knows how to do.

Fisher and Shapiro's (2005) work on *core concerns* in negotiation operates in a similar register but with a broader scope. They identify five recurring emotional concerns that, when disregarded, produce escalation in any conflict: *appreciation* (feeling that one's thoughts, feelings, and actions are understood and valued), *affiliation* (being treated as a colleague rather than an adversary), *autonomy* (the freedom to make decisions without imposition), *status* (recognition of one's standing where it is genuinely earned), and *role* (a fulfilling part to play in the proceedings). Each unmet core concern is a flattening accelerant: when a party feels unappreciated, unaffiliated, autonomously violated, demoted in status, or assigned an unacceptable role, they tend to compress the other into the cause of that injury. Shapiro's (2016) later work on the *Tribes Effect* extends this to identity-based conflict, in which the core concerns become inseparable from the identity threats they trigger. For the mediator, the five core concerns supply a portable diagnostic: when a session stalls, ask which core concern has just been violated for which party, and how that violation is showing up as flattening.

Solomon's (2024) chapter on family structure and the Family Life Cycle is worth pulling into the frame here, because it reminds the practitioner that the structural realities surrounding a dispute (blended families, sandwich-generation caregiving, boomerang kids, single-parent households, cohabitation) are not stage-setting but causal. The roles being contested are embedded in family structures whose own scripts are in flux. A conflict between an adult child and an aging parent is conducted not only between two individuals but across the still-unresolved

transition from one stage of the family life cycle to the next. The mediator who works only with the dyad without naming the structural transition is missing a major source of energy in the room.

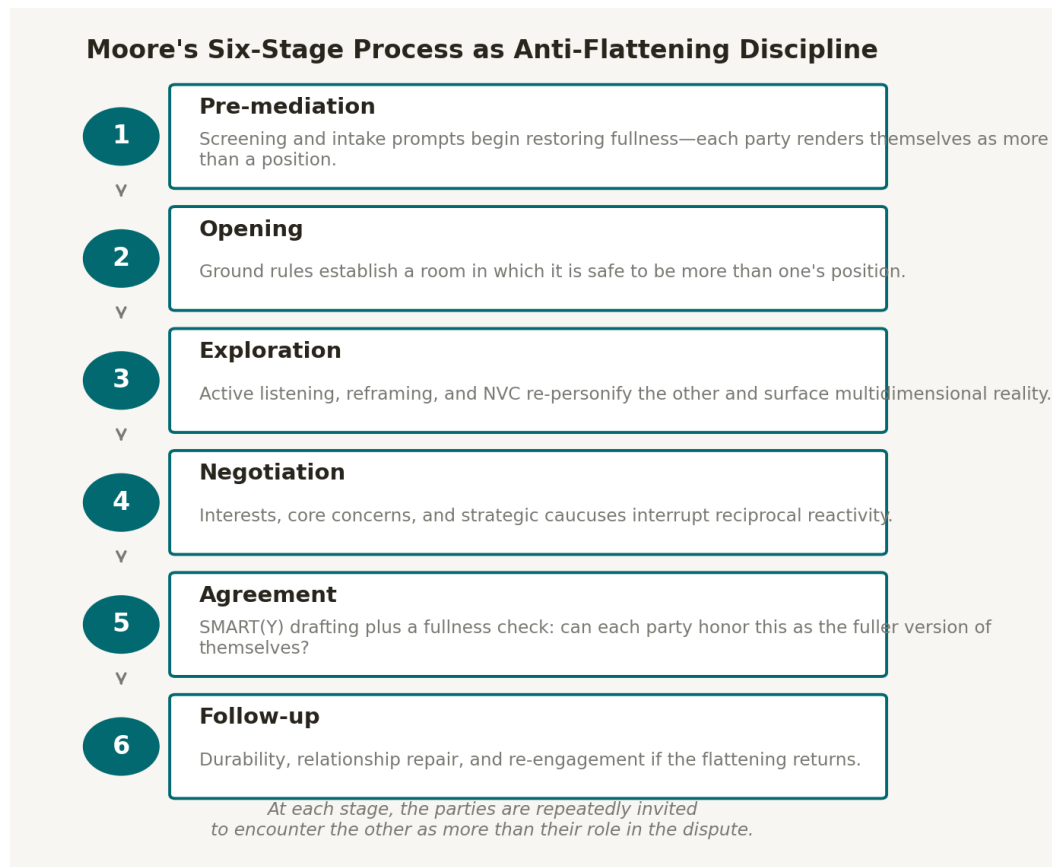
Underneath these structural realities lies the deeper cultural layer Taylor (2004) calls the social imaginary: the shared, largely unarticulated picture a community holds of how social life is supposed to work. The social imaginary is not a theory people hold; it is the normative background against which expectations are formed, encounters interpreted, and breaches recognized as breaches. The parties arriving at a marriage mediation bring imaginaries of what marriage is for and how it is supposed to function. These imaginaries are assembled from cultural narratives of romantic love, vocational partnership, household economics, and parental obligation. The parties arriving at a workplace mediation bring imaginaries of professional fairness, hierarchical legitimacy, and meritocratic recognition. The parties to a family-business dispute bring two imaginaries at once (family and business), often imperfectly reconciled even before the conflict arose.

A dispute is rarely the surface conflict it presents. It is also a collision between the social imaginaries the parties had previously inhabited together, and the conflict is, in part, the simultaneous collapse of that shared imaginary and of each party's perception of the other as someone who still inhabits it. The Bowenian triangulation, Karpman casting, attachment activation, Adlerian private-logic mobilization, and Satir-stance compression described above all happen *within* a destabilized social imaginary. When the imaginary holds, the relational and intrapsychic flattenings are recoverable: the parties still share a picture of what they are trying to do together, and that picture supplies a horizon against which behavior can be evaluated and corrected. When the imaginary itself has collapsed, the same flattening becomes much harder to

lift, because the parties no longer share even an implicit picture of the world the agreement is supposed to land in. Restoring fullness, at this level, includes helping the parties discover whether any shared imaginary can still hold them, and if not, what smaller, more honest one might. Marriage mediation that ends in divorce, family-business mediation that ends in dissolution, and partnership mediation that ends in separation are not necessarily failures of the discipline. There may be cases in which the shared imaginary was no longer recoverable, and the work was to dissolve it honorably rather than enforce a fiction.

### **The Discipline: Practices That Restore Fullness**

The procedural side of the discipline can be described as a set of practices that, taken together, work against the flattening cascade described earlier in the phenomenology section. Moore's (2014) six-stage process (pre-mediation, opening, exploration, negotiation, agreement, follow-up) is the procedural spine. What the six stages do, when executed with the discipline in view, is repeatedly invite each party to encounter the other as more than their role in the dispute.

**Figure 5***Moore's Six-Stage Mediation Process as Anti-Flattening Discipline*

*Note.* Each stage of Moore's (2014) framework, when executed with the discipline in view, provides a procedural opportunity to interrupt the flattening cascade and invite multidimensional perception.

*Pre-mediation* is where the discipline begins. The screening protocol surfaces whether the case is one that a mediator can responsibly hold, but it also begins the work of restoring fullness, because the intake form invites each party to articulate the conflict in their own words, name how it has affected them, and say what they would want the mediator to understand. These are not procedurally neutral questions; they are anti-flattening prompts. They ask each party to

render themselves as more than a position, and they prepare the mediator to enter the room already holding each party as a person.

The *opening* establishes ground rules, but its deeper work is the establishment of a particular kind of room: one in which it is safe to be more than one's position. The standard ground rules: *use I-statements; address behaviors rather than character; stay future-focused*. These are operational rules, but they are also *anthropological* rules. *Behaviors rather than character* refuse to let either party flatten the other to an essence. *I-statements* require each party to render their own experience rather than collapse it into an accusation about the other's intent. *Future-focused* releases the parties, however provisionally, from the curated narrative of the past each has arrived with.

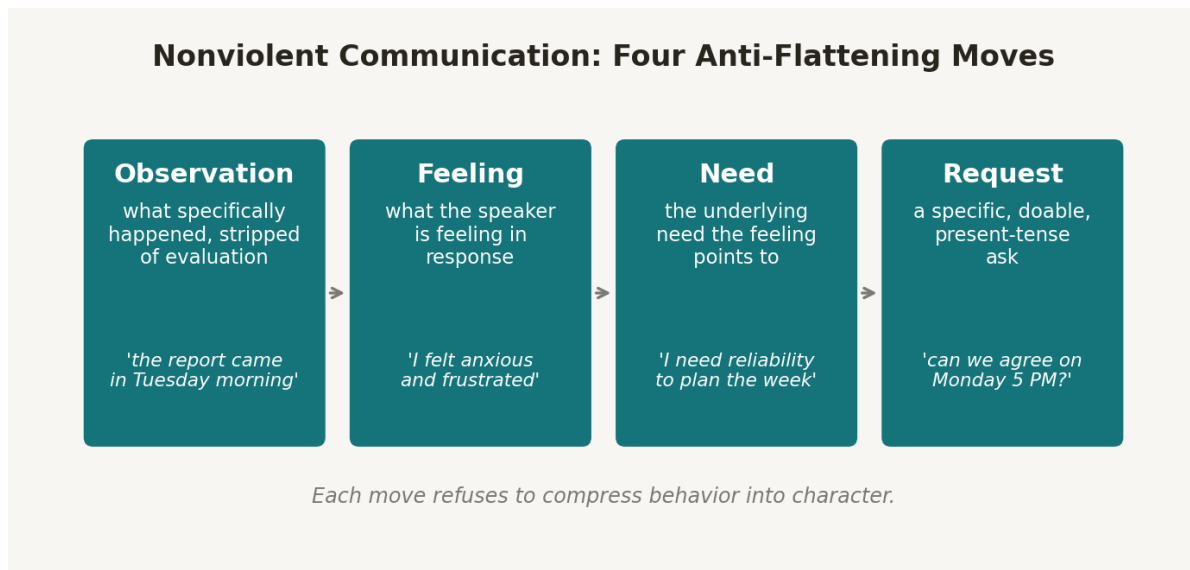
*Exploration* is where restoration of fullness happens most directly. The active-listening repertoire (paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, asking open questions, summarizing, and refocusing) is not merely a communication tool. Each move re-personifies the other. When the mediator paraphrases, she models the act of taking another's experience seriously enough to render it back accurately. When she reflects the feeling beneath the words, she names a dimension of the other that the flattened image had erased. When she asks an open question ("What would a fair outcome look like for you?"), she addresses the party as someone capable of generating an answer rather than as a token of a position. When she summarizes shared progress, she begins to assemble a *we-narrative* that includes both parties as full agents. The deeper grammar is consistent: language that closes treats the other as essence (*you always*); language that opens treats the other as agent in a situation (*when X happens, I notice Y*).

*Reframing* is the most direct anti-flattening technique in the procedural toolkit. A statement is reframed when the mediator restates it in a form that preserves its content but

removes the implicit reduction of the other to an essence. *He is irresponsible* because he submitted the report late, which *delayed the project*. The first formulation is a flattening; the second is a description of a situation in which the other might act differently. Reframing is not a euphemism. It is the linguistic correlate of restored multidimensional perception. In Drama Triangle terms, reframing also refuses to ratify the casting: it returns the Persecutor description ("she is impossible") to a Challenger description ("she has been firm about deadlines"), and the Victim description ("I have no say in any of this") to a Vulnerable description ("it has been hard to have your concerns heard"), restoring the multidimensional personhood the casting had erased (Choy, 1990; Karpman, 1968).

A brief composite illustration may make the movement concrete. Two former business partners arrive at mediation after a bitter dissolution. One opens as Persecutor, saying, 'He ran the company into the ground and then blamed me,' while the other sits in Victim silence and then withdrawal. A settlement-only process would press both toward terms while each still holds the other flat. The discipline works differently. Reframing returns the first partner's accusation to a Challenger assertion ('You needed decisions made faster than they were made, and that has cost you'); reflective listening invites the second partner out of Victim silence into Vulnerable speech ('I stopped saying what I thought because I assumed it would not land'); and the mediator, resisting the Rescuer pull toward the quieter party, holds a Caring stance, present and resourcing, but returning responsibility to each. None of this guarantees an agreement, but it changes what an agreement, if reached, is built on. Consistent with the conceptual aims stated earlier, this vignette is an illustrative composite rather than reported case data; like autoethnographic accounts of mediator development (Wong, 2025), the observations behind it are practice-based and exploratory, offered to show the framework in motion rather than to evidence an outcome.

Rosenberg's (2015) Nonviolent Communication (NVC) framework supplies a closely related linguistic discipline. NVC structures expression in four moves: *observation* (what specifically happened, stripped of evaluation), *feeling* (what the speaker is feeling in response), *need* (the underlying need or value the feeling points to), and *request* (a specific, doable, present-tense ask). Each move is, in this paper's terms, anti-flattening. Observation refuses to compress behavior into character ("the report came in Tuesday morning" rather than "you are unreliable"). Feeling re-personifies the speaker as an experienced subject rather than a position-holder. Need points beneath both the feeling and the position to the deeper concern at which restoration becomes possible. Request returns the conversation to the present and to action that does not require the other party to have been someone different. The mediator who has internalized NVC can model it without naming it and can gently coach the parties into it through reframing that follows the same four-move grammar.

**Figure 6***Nonviolent Communication's Four Anti-Flattening Moves*

*Note.* Rosenberg's (2015) OFNR sequence (Observation, Feeling, Need, Request) structures expression so that behavior is never compressed into character. Each move re-personifies the speaker and addresses the other as agent rather than essence.

Fisher and Shapiro's (2005) five core concerns provide a complementary diagnostic during exploration. When a party goes rigid in the room, the mediator can ask internally: which core concern has just been violated? Was it appreciation, or the party feeling their account is not being valued? Affiliation, being treated as the adversary rather than as a fellow participant in a shared problem? Autonomy, having a solution proposed for them rather than with them? Status, being subtly demoted in the way they were addressed? Role, being assigned a part in the proceedings, can they not accept? Naming the violated core concern, often within a caucus rather than in the joint session, allows the mediator to address what is driving the flattening rather than its surface presentation. This is the engagement-rather-than-resolution posture Mayer (2004,

2012) argues for: a willingness to slow down at the moment the case is most tempted to push toward closure.

*Strategic caucuses* are a second anti-flattening device. The caucus removes one party from the immediate gaze of the other, interrupting the reciprocal reactivity that keeps each party's flattened image of the other in active use. In the privacy of the caucus, a party can voice ambivalence, doubt, or fatigue that the joint session does not safely hold. The mediator's task in the caucus is not to take that party's side but to help them re-encounter their own complexity, which is the precondition of their being able to re-encounter the other's.

*Impasse-typing* is a discipline of its own. Six impasse types (cognitive, emotional, moral, identity, relational, and process) each call for different responses, and naming the type is half the work (Schweinsberg et al., 2022). Identity and moral impasses are most directly tied to flattening: an identity impasse arises when a proposed resolution would require a party to be a kind of person they cannot accept being, and a moral impasse arises when the resolution would require accepting an interpretation of events that violates a deeply held value. Both require the mediator to address the perception of self and other directly, often through observational humor, best-interest pivots, or careful reframing that restores the party's own fullness before any further movement is possible (Schweinsberg et al., 2022).

*Agreement engineering*, what practitioners often shorthand as SMART(Y) (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely, and *yours*, meaning the parties' own), is the procedural close. But the discipline holds even here. Agreements that hold are agreements the parties can imagine living out *as the persons they actually are*, not as the flattened tokens the conflict produced. The mediator's last act of the discipline is to ask, in whatever form fits the case: *Is this*

*an agreement you can honor as the fuller version of yourself you have become in this room?*

When the answer is yes, the discipline has done its work.

Lederach's (2005) *moral imagination* names what the parties must be doing internally for the agreement to be honorable in that way. Moral imagination has four disciplines: *centering relationships* (perceiving oneself in a relational web rather than as an isolated agent), *practicing paradoxical curiosity* (holding apparently irreconcilable truths simultaneously), *inviting the creative act* (risking solutions that have not been tried), and *accepting the inherent risk of constructive engagement* (proceeding without the guarantee of a safe outcome). Each is, structurally, a restoration of fullness. Centering relationships restores the other as a relational partner rather than an opponent. Paradoxical curiosity restores the both/and. The creative act restores agency in a situation that flattening had rendered fixed. Accepting risk restores the parties as agents capable of moving toward each other under uncertainty. The procedural discipline cataloged in this section creates the conditions under which moral imagination becomes possible. The agreement that holds is signed by parties whose moral imagination has been awake for the duration of the session.

### **The Mediator's Interior Life**

Restoring fullness for others is impossible without practicing it in oneself. The mediator's internal state is itself an intervention. Mindfulness, breathing, body scans, and self-regulation are not soft add-ons; they shape psychological safety in the room before words do. The mediator who is not formed internally will over-identify with one party, collapse into a procedural neutrality that is itself a kind of flattening, or drift into amateur therapy. The interior side of the discipline can be described through a confluence of frameworks. ACT provides the most useful architecture; DBT and mindfulness practice add specificity; emotional intelligence research and

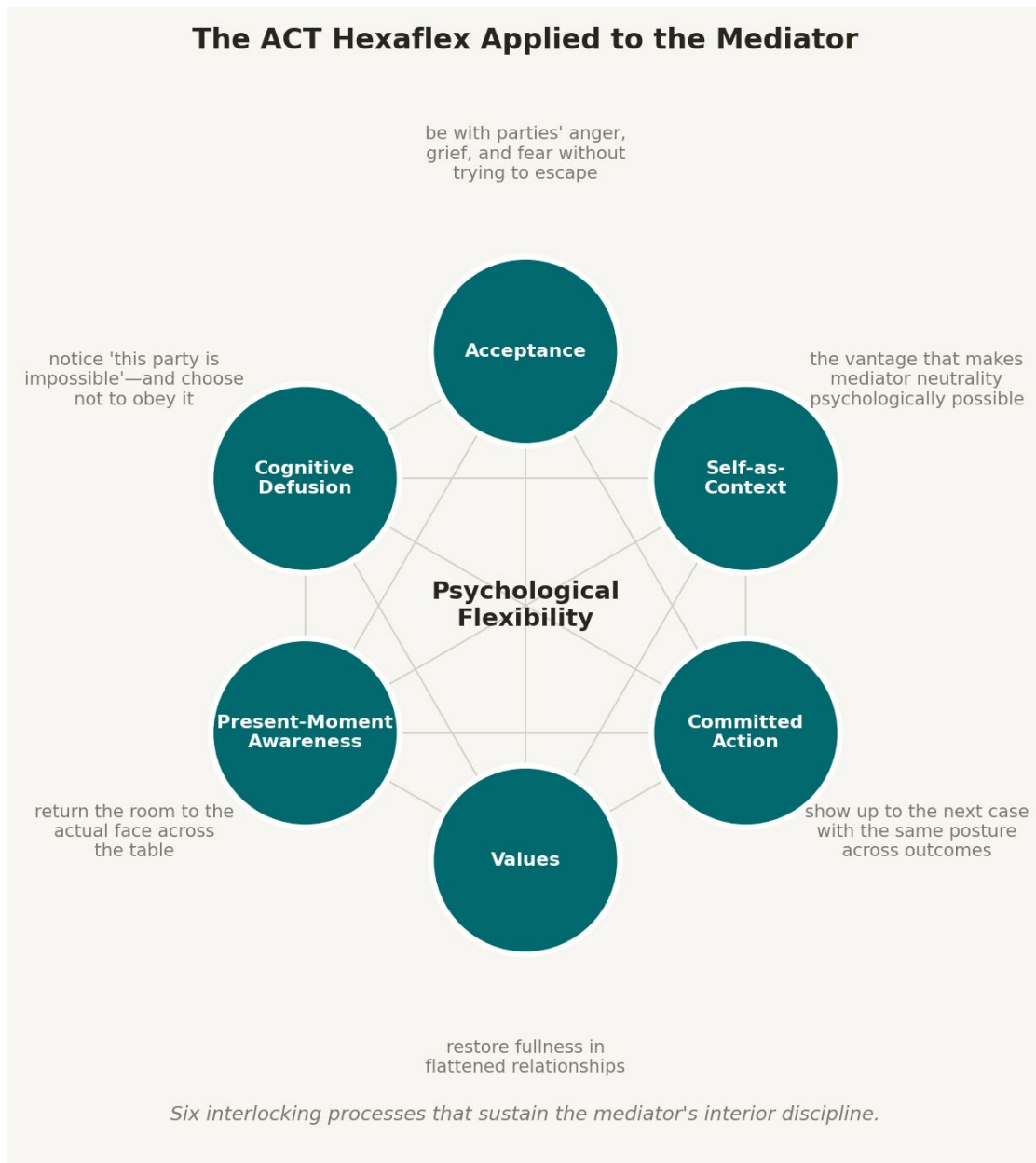
Siegel's Window of Tolerance provide the neurobiological anchor; and Person-Centered theory supplies the relational stance that ties them together.

### **The ACT Hexaflex Applied to the Mediator**

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes et al., 2012) organizes psychological flexibility around six interlocking processes, the *hexaflex* (a hexagonal model with six points). Each has a direct application to the mediator's interior practice. Treating ACT as a list of six techniques understates the point: in its more recent formulation, it is a unified model of behavior change in which psychological flexibility is the common change process across applications (Hayes, 2019), and a systematic review of the mechanism-of-change evidence finds this flexibility process behaving largely as the model predicts (Stockton et al., 2019). For the mediator, the six capacities below are therefore not a menu but facets of one disciplined posture whose mechanism is, at least in principle, open to empirical test.

**Figure 7**

*The ACT Hexaflex Applied to the Mediator's Interior Discipline*



*Note.* Each of the six processes (acceptance, defusion, present-moment awareness, self-as-context, values, and committed action) supplies a distinct interior capacity that resists the flattening pull of the room. Adapted from Hayes et al. (2012).

*Acceptance* is the willingness to make contact with present-moment experience without struggle. For the mediator, acceptance is the willingness to be in the room with the parties' anger, grief, contempt, fear, and despair without trying to escape, soften, or fix what is in the air. The non-acceptant mediator either flattens the parties' emotional reality (*let's just stay focused on the issues*) or absorbs it as her own. Acceptance allows the room to be as charged as it actually is. That is the precondition of the parties feeling safe enough to be as full as they are.

*Cognitive defusion* loosens the literal grip of thoughts so they can be observed rather than obeyed. For the mediator, defusion is the capacity to notice the thought that *this party is impossible* and not act on it. The thought is not the territory. The flattened image that arises automatically in the mediator's own mind is a System 1 product (Kahneman, 2011) and need not be obeyed. Defusion creates the gap in which the mediator chooses what to do next from values rather than reactivity.

*Present-moment awareness* is the trained capacity to attend to what is here, now. Conflict pulls everyone in the room into the past (a rehearsed grievance) and the future (a catastrophic prediction). The present-moment awareness is the gravity that pulls the room back to the table, to the actual face of the actual person across from each party right now.

*Self-as-context* is, for the mediator, perhaps the most important of the six. It is the stable vantage from which one can observe one's own experience without being identified with it. It is what makes mediator neutrality psychologically possible. A mediator without self-as-context will either fuse with one party's narrative or harden into a defensive procedural shell. Self-as-context allows her to hold both parties' realities with full seriousness while remaining oriented to a vantage point that is neither of them. It is the interior correlate of the procedural neutrality the role requires.

*Values clarification* is the work of naming the directions one wants to live toward, distinct from outcome goals. For the mediator, the organizing value is something like *the restoration of fullness in flattened relationships*, or, in more conventional terms, *helping people see one another more clearly than the conflict allows*. When the values are clear, the practitioner can sustain the work across cases that do not resolve well, parties who do not change, and outcomes that disappoint.

*Committed action* is behavior in service of values, sustained across affective weather. The mediator's commitment is to the discipline itself: to show up to the next case with the same posture, even when the previous case ended badly, to remain curious even when fatigued, to refuse the shortcuts that flatten the parties for the sake of expedient settlement.

### **DBT: Radical Acceptance, Wise Mind, and the Both/And**

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Linehan, 1993) supplies a second layer. Three concepts are particularly relevant. *Radical acceptance* is the full acceptance, with mind and body, of what cannot be changed. For the mediator, radical acceptance is the recognition that the parties arrived as they arrived, the conflict happened as it happened, and the work begins from where the room actually is, not from where one wishes it were. Without radical acceptance, the mediator wastes interior energy resisting the reality of the case. DBT and ACT are often grouped together as third-wave, contextual-behavioral therapies, yet they rest on different foundations (DBT on Linehan's biosocial account of emotion dysregulation, ACT on relational frame theory), which gives each a distinct theory of how change occurs (Ruork et al., 2022). The mediator borrows from both deliberately: DBT's biosocial framing for what the parties' dysregulation is and how acceptance steadies it, and ACT's flexibility model for how the mediator's own stance is held.

*Wise Mind* is the integration of *the emotional mind and the reasonable mind*, the synthesis at the center of the DBT model. For the mediator, wise mind is the operative interior posture: emotionally attuned and analytically clear at the same time, neither flattening the room into a pure analytic exercise nor collapsing into emotional reactivity. The both/and is not a compromise; it is a higher integration.

*Dialectical thinking* itself (the capacity to hold apparently opposing truths as simultaneously valid) is the cognitive grammar of the discipline. Linehan's signature dialectic, "you are doing the best you can, and you need to do better," is precisely the move the mediator makes for each party in turn. The party is, in the moment, the version of themselves the conflict has produced; and the party is, in potential, the fuller version capable of an agreement they can honor. Both are true at once. The mediator's job is to hold both. The next section develops the deeper philosophical grammar of this move.

### **Mindfulness Practice**

Mindfulness practice (Christian, Zen, secular, or otherwise) is no longer optional for sustained meditation work. Useful practices include a brief pre-mediation routine (breath, body scan), a mid-session grounding cue when emotionally activated, and a post-session decompression habit to prevent carryover and burnout. The *style* of mindfulness should fit the practitioner: Christian for those with a Christian frame of reference, secular for those without. The integrative principle is that the practice must be one that the practitioner can sustain. For a Confessional Lutheran practitioner, Christian contemplative traditions, such as *lectio divina* (slow, prayerful reading of Scripture), breath-prayer, and the daily office, provide functionally similar interior structuring without requiring theological frames that are foreign to one's working anthropology.

### **Emotional Intelligence and the Window of Tolerance**

Emotional intelligence research provides a complementary framework for the mediator's inner work. Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined emotional intelligence as the capacity to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and in others. Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2004) refined this into a four-branch ability model that maps cleanly onto the mediator's task: *perception* (reading the emotional state of each party accurately, including emotions the party has not yet named); *use* (deploying emotional information to guide attention and decision-making at the table); *understanding* (knowing how emotions develop, blend, and transition, namely that anger often masks fear, that contempt masks shame, that withdrawal often masks attachment alarm); and *management* (regulating one's own emotional state while remaining genuinely present to the parties'). Goleman's (1995, 2006) more popular account organizes the same capacities around self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management. For the mediator, emotional intelligence is not a stand-alone skill but the operational form ACT's acceptance, defusion, and self-as-context take when the relational field is being read accurately.

Siegel's (2010, 2012) *window of tolerance* gives this interior work a neurobiological anchor. Within the window, integrated cortical and limbic processing is available; outside the window, in either hyperarousal or hypoarousal, the more sophisticated work of empathic attunement and dialectical seeing becomes intermittent or unavailable. The mediator's interior practice is, in this register, the work of staying within her own window while remaining attuned to where each party is in theirs, and intervening procedurally to help the parties stay within or return to their own windows. The pre-mediation routine, mid-session grounding cues, paced reflective listening, well-timed caucuses, and even the simple expedient of slowing the pace of

speech in the room are all interventions on the parties' windows of tolerance. Schore (2003) describes the deeper mechanism: right-brain-to-right-brain affect regulation, in which the regulated nervous system of one person becomes the temporary scaffolding for the dysregulated nervous system of another. The mediator, who is herself regulated, supplies that scaffolding without naming it. *The mediator's internal state is itself an intervention.* In this language, that is technically correct: the regulated mediator's autonomic state is, literally, contagious through the same right-brain affective channels that produce the flattening cascade in the first place.

### **Person-Centered Roots: Congruence, UPR, Empathic Understanding**

Rogers (1961) supplies the relational stance that ties the interior practice to the procedural one. The three conditions he identified as facilitative of human change, namely *congruence* (the alignment of inner experience, awareness, and outward expression), *unconditional positive regard* (the regard for the other as a person of worth, independent of behavior), and *empathic understanding* (the accurate perception of the other's experiential world as if it were one's own), describe almost exactly what the mediator does in service of restoring fullness. Congruence makes the mediator a non-flattened presence in the room: the parties can read her, and they can read that she is not performing. UPR is the refusal to flatten either party, even when their behavior is at its worst. Empathic understanding is the active practice of perceiving each party in their fullness, including dimensions the parties themselves may not yet have articulated.

### **Countertransference, Triangle Recruitment, and Scope Discipline**

Three final interior practices deserve naming. The first is *countertransference awareness*: the disciplined noticing of when something, in this case, is activating something old in the

mediator. The mediator who has not done her own work will silently flatten the parties along the lines of her own unresolved material.

The second is *resistance to triangle recruitment*. Karpman's (1968) Drama Triangle predicts that the mediator will be pulled, most often toward the Rescuer role, especially when the case includes strong Victim affect and clear material grievance, but sometimes toward Persecutor ("she is being unreasonable; I need to push back") or toward Victim ("this case is doing this to me"). The Rescuer pull is the most insidious because it feels, from the inside, like compassion. From outside the triangle, it is the position that confirms the Victim's flattened self-perception and the Persecutor's externalized blame, while quietly assuming the Victim cannot act on their own behalf. ACT's self-as-context provides the vantage point from which the pull can be noticed before it becomes action; cognitive defusion allows the thought "I need to save this person (or I need to fix this one)" to be observed rather than obeyed. The mediator who has learned to notice the recruitment is the mediator who can offer Choy's (1990) *Caring* posture instead: presence and resource without ownership of the other's responsibility. This is, structurally, the difference between Rescue and care, and, operationally, one of the most consequential interior distinctions in the work.

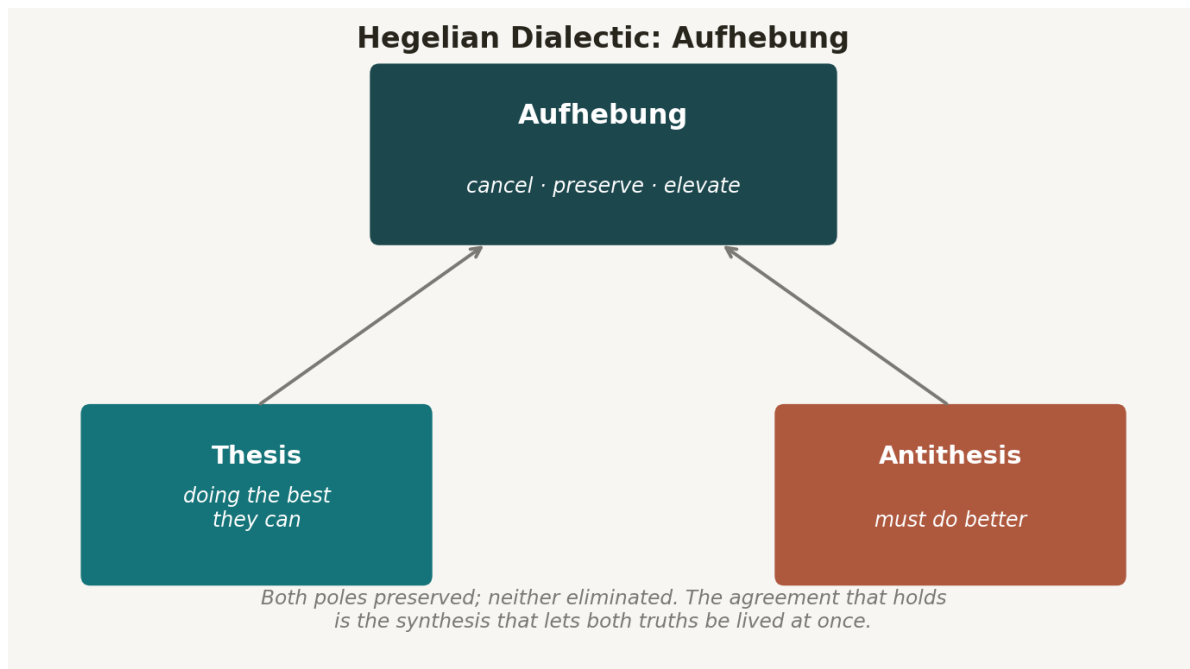
The third is *scope discipline*: mediation is not therapy. The mediator who drifts into amateur therapy has lost the role even while claiming to honor the people. The discipline of fullness is exercised within the limits of the role, not by abandoning it.

### **Hegelian Dialectics as the Animating Logic**

The both/and described in the previous section is not a casual or rhetorical move. It rests on a particular philosophical logic, and naming that logic clarifies what the mediator is doing

when she holds apparently opposing truths in productive tension. The logic is dialectical, but in a specific sense that has historically been obscured.

Linehan (1993) credits Marxist dialectical materialism as the philosophical foundation for DBT's dialectical framework, but closer examination suggests that Hegelian dialectics provides a more robust and clinically coherent grounding. The attribution is historically imprecise: Marx appropriated Hegel's dialectical structure but fundamentally inverted it, relocating the engine of change from consciousness and relational becoming to material and economic conditions. Linehan developed much of DBT before explicitly framing it in dialectical terms; the dialectical nomenclature was layered onto an existing clinical architecture rather than serving as its generative foundation. The conceptual logic of DBT operates squarely within Hegelian territory. Its emphasis on synthesis through tension, the therapeutic relationship as a site of mutual recognition, and the primacy of meaning-making and consciousness align far more naturally with Hegel's phenomenological project than with Marx's materialist revision of it. DBT's philosophical home may be less Marx than the thinker Marx sought to stand on his head.

**Figure 8***Hegelian Aufhebung: The Logic Animating the Discipline*

*Note.* Aufhebung simultaneously cancels, preserves, and elevates the opposing poles of a contradiction into a livable higher synthesis. Linehan's signature dialectic, *you are doing the best you can and must do better*, is structurally Hegelian rather than Marxist (Hegel, 1807/1977).

The cornerstone dialectic of DBT, that a client *is doing the best they can and must do better*, reflects Hegel's (1807/1977) concept of *Aufhebung*, the simultaneous cancellation, preservation, and elevation of opposing truths into a livable, higher synthesis, rather than Marx's resolution of contradiction through elimination of one pole. Hegel's master-slave dialectic anticipates the therapeutic relationship itself: the mutual recognition between two consciousnesses as a transformative, identity-shaping encounter. And Hegel's insistence that the self is never fixed but always in *Becoming* (identity as process rather than possession) aligns more naturally with DBT's skills-based, practice-oriented model of change than with any Marxist framework (Hegel, 1812/2010). Linehan's dialectical method may, in this light, be better

understood as an applied clinical expression of Hegelian dialectics, with Marx serving as an intermediate philosophical carrier rather than the originating source.

For the mediator's discipline, the Hegelian framing carries direct consequences. Mediation does not eliminate the conflict between the parties; it *aufhebt* it. It cancels, preserves, and elevates the opposing truths into an agreement both can live within. The party who has been wronged is not asked to abandon the truth of their grievance; the party who is accused is not being asked to abandon the truth of their context. Both truths are preserved in the synthesis represented by the agreement. The mediator's role in the master-slave register is the third position that refuses to participate in the recognition economy as a zero-sum game. Mutual recognition is possible only when a witness recognizes both parties as more than the conflict has reduced them to. The mediator is, in her best moments, that witness. The same logic underwrites the movement from the Drama Triangle to the Winner's Triangle described earlier in the family-systems discussion: the Winner's Triangle does not eliminate the apparent contradictions in each role (the Vulnerable position's pain and agency, the Challenger position's assertion and respect, the Caring position's compassion and limits) but holds them together in a higher, livable synthesis. *Aufhebung* is the structural grammar that lets the triangle be transformed rather than merely escaped.

The Hegelian framing carries theological significance as well. Hegel, himself formed within the Lutheran tradition, constructed a dialectical logic that bears structural resemblance to the Lutheran tension of Law and Gospel, the simultaneous experience of condemnation and grace that does not resolve into one or the other but holds both in a transformative, redemptive synthesis (Hodgson, 2005). Far from requiring theology to be reintroduced into the clinical or mediation frame, a Hegelian foundation may never have fully left it. For the Confessional

Lutheran mediator, this is not a curiosity but a continuity: the dialectical seeing the work requires is structurally the same dialectical seeing the gospel has long required of those who live by it.

### **Anthropological Grounding: Vocation, Buber, and the Two-Kingdoms Frame**

What, ultimately, is the fullness the mediator is restoring? The procedural and interior practices described above can be specified without theological commitments, and the paper has tried to do so. But for a Confessional Lutheran practitioner, the anthropology underlying the work is explicit and worth naming, because it changes nothing in practice while clarifying what is finally at stake.

Luther's doctrine of the *two kingdoms* distinguishes the civil order (in which mediation primarily operates) from the gospel order (which is not the mediator's register), without collapsing or opposing them. The mediator operates as a civil agent: neutral, procedural, accountable to the law and to the parties' own self-determination. She does not bring the gospel to the table, nor does she require the parties to share her theological frame. But the people across the table are never *only* civil agents. They are also persons before God with vocations that the conflict is disrupting: vocations as parent, spouse, employee, neighbor, congregant, citizen. Wingren's (1957) treatment of Luther on vocation is the indispensable text: vocation is the means by which God serves the neighbor through the ordinary stations of human life. A conflict between two business partners is, in this register, the disruption of two neighbor-facing vocations. Restoring fullness to the partners as persons is, indirectly, the restoration of those vocations to operational health. The mediator does not need to name this for it to be operative.

*Simul justus et peccator*, Latin for *simultaneously righteous and sinner*, supplies the grammar for how the mediator holds accountability and personhood at the same time without collapsing either (Forde, 1997). The party that has acted badly has acted badly; the party that has

acted badly is also more than the act. Both are fully true at once. This is not the easy moralism of *hating the sin and loving the sinner*, which, in practice, tends to collapse into one or the other; it is the harder dialectic of holding both with equal seriousness. The Hegelian dialectical logic of the previous section is, in this respect, structurally Lutheran before it is anything else.

Finally, Buber's (1923/1970) distinction between *I-Thou* and *I-It* relations names what fullness ultimately is. In an I-It relation, the other is encountered as an object: a token of a category, a means to my end, a problem to be managed, a role in my dispute. In an I-Thou relation, the other is encountered as a person whose being is not reducible to any category or function. The flattening produced by conflict is, in Buber's terms, a sustained collapse of I-Thou into I-It. The mediator's discipline, in its deepest description, is the discipline of being the third party who refuses to encounter either side as an *It*, and whose refusal makes possible, without compelling, the parties' own renewed I-Thou encounter with one another. The agreement that holds is the agreement signed by parties who have, even briefly, met one another that way again.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Two limitations follow directly from the genre of this paper. First, it is conceptual and integrative rather than empirical: it proposes a framework and a vocabulary, not findings. It therefore offers no outcome data of the kind generated by controlled trials of trauma-informed and mindfulness-based interventions (Kelly & Garland, 2016) or by quasi-experimental peacebuilding studies that measure autonomic and attitudinal change against a comparison group (Kuhar et al., 2024). Claims advanced here about what restoring fullness does for the durability of agreements are, at this stage, theoretically motivated and practice-based rather than demonstrated. Second, the practice observations woven through the paper are the author's own

and are presented as exploratory, in the manner of autoethnographic accounts of mediator development (Wong, 2025), rather than as systematically collected evidence.

These limitations point to a research program. The central empirical question is whether fullness-restoring processes are in fact mechanisms of durable agreement. That is, whether measured shifts from Drama-Triangle to WWinner-Triangle positioning, from constricted to widened windows of tolerance, or from flattened to multidimensional perception statistically account for downstream settlement stability. Mechanism-of-change designs of the sort now standard in the ACT literature (Stockton et al., 2019), adapted to mediation through mixed-methods and longitudinal follow-up, would allow the model to be tested rather than merely asserted. Instruments already exist for several of the constructs the framework relies on, such as interoceptive awareness and autonomic reactivity (Kuhar et al., 2024), Drama-Triangle role occupancy, and the core-concern violations cataloged earlier, so the framework is, in principle, operationalizable. Naming it precisely, as this paper has tried to do, is a precondition of that work.

### **Conclusion: The Mediator as Restorer of Fullness**

The argument of this paper has been that the central work of mediation is not procedural management, interest excavation, or agreement engineering, although it is all of those. The central work is the restoration of fullness in relationships that conflict has flattened. The flattening is a recognizable phenomenon with cognitive, attitudinal, relational, and family-systems roots; it is what makes settlement without fullness unstable; and it is what the mediator's discipline, procedural and interior, exists to resist. The procedural practices draw on Moore, Fisher, and the transformative-mediation tradition but are reframed here as anti-flattening practices rather than as interest-based bargaining techniques. The interior practices draw on

ACT, DBT, mindfulness, emotional-intelligence research, and Person-Centered theory, and they converge on a single posture: the mediator herself as a non-flattened presence in the room, capable of holding the parties' full reality without being flattened by it. The animating logic is dialectical in the Hegelian sense: *Aufhebung*, mutual recognition, identity as *Becoming*, and not in the Marxist sense. The deepest anthropology is the Lutheran one: people are never reducible to their function in any moment's dispute, because their being is finally received from somewhere other than the dispute.

Returning to the compact image introduced at the outset, the whole of the discipline can be summarized as the movement of every person in the room (both parties and the mediator herself) from a position in Karpman's (1968) Drama Triangle to the corresponding position in Choy's (1990) Winner's Triangle. The Persecutor becomes the Challenger who asserts a legitimate need without reducing the other to an essence. The Victim becomes the Vulnerable person who claims pain and limitation without surrendering agency. The Rescuer becomes the one who cares, offering presence and resource without taking ownership of the other's responsibility. The mediator's interior discipline includes refusing to occupy any of the three Drama Triangle positions herself, so that her presence in the room invites the same migration in the parties she serves. This is not a technique. It is what the restoration of fullness actually looks like in the geometry of a three-party system under stress, and it is, structurally, the Hegelian *Aufhebung* applied to a relational triangle: nothing discarded, both poles of each apparent contradiction preserved, the whole elevated to a livable higher integration.

The practical implication for the mediator who would inhabit the discipline is that the work must be done both in the room and in the years of formation that preceded each session. Procedural skills can be taught in a semester; interior practice is the work of a career. The

paradox at the center of the discipline is that the more fully the mediator can see each party, the less she needs to do procedurally to bring them to the same kind of seeing. Restoration of fullness is contagious. So is its absence. The mediator who has practiced the discipline internally carries it into the room, and the room becomes, for an hour or two, a place where being seen fully is possible again. Whether the parties leave with an agreement is, in some real sense, secondary. They leave with the experience of having been encountered as more than the role the conflict assigned them, and that experience is itself the beginning of the restoration. The agreement, if it comes, will be formalized.

### References

- Adler, A. (2010). *Understanding human nature* (C. Brett, Trans.). Hazelden. (Original work published 1927)
- Ansbacher, H. L., & Ansbacher, R. R. (Eds.). (1956). *The individual psychology of Alfred Adler: A systematic presentation in selections from his writings*. Basic Books.
- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. Jason Aronson.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. Basic Books.
- Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). Scribner. (Original work published 1923)
- Bush, R. A. B., & Folger, J. P. (2005). *The promise of mediation: The transformative approach to conflict* (Rev. ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Choy, A. (1990). The Winner's Triangle. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 20(1), 40–46.
- Cloke, K. (2001). *Mediating dangerously: The frontiers of conflict resolution*. Jossey-Bass.
- Cloke, K. (2006). *The crossroads of conflict: A journey into the heart of dispute resolution*. Janis Publications.
- Clowry, S. (2023). International mediation, identity construction, and normative change. *International Negotiation*. Advance online publication.  
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10088>
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention, and behavior: An introduction to theory and research*. Addison-Wesley.
- Fisher, R., & Shapiro, D. (2005). *Beyond reason: Using emotions as you negotiate*. Viking.

- Fisher, R., Ury, W., & Patton, B. (2011). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in* (3rd ed.). Penguin.
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (2013). *Social cognition: From brains to culture* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Forde, G. O. (1997). *On being a theologian of the cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. Eerdmans.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. Bantam Books.
- Goleman, D. (2006). *Social intelligence: The new science of human relationships*. Bantam Books.
- Hayes, S. C. (2019). Acceptance and commitment therapy: Towards a unified model of behavior change. *World Psychiatry*, 18(2), 226–227. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20626>
- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (2012). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1977). *Phenomenology of Spirit* (A. V. Miller, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1807)
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2010). *The science of logic* (G. di Giovanni, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1812)
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence, from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.
- Hodgson, P. C. (2005). *Hegel and Christian theology: A reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, S. M. (2019). *Attachment theory in practice: Emotionally focused therapy with individuals, couples, and families*. Guilford Press.

- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Karpman, S. B. (1968). Fairy tales and script drama analysis. *Transactional Analysis Bulletin*, 7(26), 39–43.
- Katz, D. (1960). The functional approach to the study of attitudes. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24(2), 163–204.
- Kelly, A., & Garland, E. L. (2016). Trauma-informed mindfulness-based stress reduction for female survivors of interpersonal violence: Results from a Stage I RCT. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 72(4), 311–328. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22273>
- Kelman, H. C. (1958). Compliance, identification, and internalization: Three processes of attitude change. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2(1), 51–60.
- Kuhar, M., Bolko, I., & Zupančič, R. (2024). Trauma-informed approach for bridging ethnic distance in post-conflict societies: A pilot study and intervention evaluation. *Advances in Methodology and Statistics*, 20(1). <https://mz.mf.uni-lj.si/index.php/ams/article/view/mz-2023-20-1-3-kuhar>
- L'Abate, L. (2009). The drama triangle: An attempt to resurrect a neglected pathogenic model in family therapy theory and practice. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 37(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01926180701870163>
- Lederach, J. P. (2003). *The little book of conflict transformation*. Good Books.
- Lederach, J. P. (2005). *The moral imagination: The art and soul of building peace*. Oxford University Press.
- Linehan, M. M. (1993). *Cognitive-behavioral treatment of borderline personality disorder*. Guilford Press.
- Linton, R. (1936). *The study of man: An introduction*. Appleton-Century.

Mayer, B. (2004). *Beyond neutrality: Confronting the crisis in conflict resolution*. Jossey-Bass.

Mayer, B. (2012). *The dynamics of conflict: A guide to engagement and intervention* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Ruork, A. K., Finkelstein, J., McLean, C. L., & Rizvi, S. L. (2022). Dialectical behavior therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy: Areas of overlap and distinction. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 52(4), 281–292. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10879-022-09550-x>

Mayer, J. D., Salovey, P., & Caruso, D. R. (2004). Emotional intelligence: Theory, findings, and implications. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(3), 197–215.

McKimm, J., & Forrest, K. (2010). Using transactional analysis to improve clinical and educational supervision: The Drama and Winner's triangles. *Postgraduate Medical Journal*, 86(1015), 261–265. <https://doi.org/10.1136/pgmj.2009.093310>

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. University of Chicago Press.

Merton, R. K. (1957). The role-set: Problems in sociological theory. *British Journal of Sociology*, 8(2), 106–120.

Moore, C. W. (2014). *The mediation process: Practical strategies for resolving conflict* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Free Press.

Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin.

Rosenberg, M. B. (2015). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life* (3rd ed.). PuddleDancer Press.

- Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9(3), 185–211.
- Satir, V. (1972). *Peoplemaking*. Science and Behavior Books.
- Schore, A. N. (2003). *Affect regulation and the repair of the self*. W. W. Norton.
- Schweinsberg, M., Thau, S., & Pillutla, M. M. (2022). Negotiation impasses: Types, causes, and resolutions. *Journal of Management*, 48(1), 49–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063211021657>
- Shapiro, D. L. (2010). Relational identity theory: A systematic approach for transforming the emotional dimension of conflict. *American Psychologist*, 65(7), 634–645.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020004>
- Shapiro, D. L. (2016). *Negotiating the nonnegotiable: How to resolve your most emotionally charged conflicts*. Viking.
- Siegel, D. J. (2010). *The mindful therapist: A clinician's guide to mindsight and neural integration*. W. W. Norton.
- Siegel, D. J. (2012). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Solomon, M. R. (2024). *Consumer behavior: Buying, having, and being* (14th ed.). Pearson.
- Stockton, D., Kellett, S., Berrios, R., Sirois, F., Wilkinson, N., & Miles, G. (2019). Identifying the underlying mechanisms of change during acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT): A systematic review of contemporary mediation studies. *Behavioral and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 47(3), 332–362. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1352465818000553>

- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- Taylor, C. (2004). *Modern social imaginaries*. Duke University Press.
- van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.
- Wingren, G. (1957). *Luther on vocation* (C. C. Rasmussen, Trans.). Muhlenberg Press.
- Wong, M. M. K. K. (2025). Bridging others, transforming self: An autoethnographic inquiry into personal growth through volunteer community mediation. *International Journal of Conflict Management*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-04-2025-0132>