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# Book Review

## Navigating Conflict: How Youth Handle Trouble in a High-Poverty School

*Michael Moffitt*

Calvin Morrill and Michael Musheno. *Navigating Conflict: How Youth Handle Trouble in a High-Poverty School*. University of Chicago Press, 2018. 298 pages. \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN: 13-978-0-226-52373-6.

Youth in high-poverty, inner-city public high schools routinely experience—and must navigate—the prospect of conflict. The conventional public imagination regarding potential and actual conflict in such settings does not align with many students’ lived experiences. Dominant narratives coming from outside tend to focus on youth engaged in violence and aggression. To focus exclusively on such antisocial behaviors, however, is to miss the complex range of students’ adaptive responses and the external factors that shape their choices.

Based on careful longitudinal ethnographic research, Calvin Morrill and Michael Musheno offer a detailed counter-narrative—one in which youth (in their own voices) describe and catalogue the range of their responses to potential conflict. Based on their findings, the authors make a plea to educational policymakers to reject carceral-like approaches to school safety, in favor of policies that permit and even develop both social trust and what the authors refer to as “anchored fluidity.” For those in the conflict and dispute resolution world, the authors offer a stimulating challenge to some of the conventional catalogues of conflict responses with which readers of *Negotiation Journal* are most likely quite familiar. The book is ambitious, thorough, and ultimately successful in its most provocative goals—the most significant of which is to tell the simultaneous tales of “social ingenuity [and] resilience ... in young people’s own voices” (xi).

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For sixteen years, Morrill and Musheno and their research team studied one high-poverty public school in the southwestern United States, using a range of ethnographic approaches. Their research included the kinds of focus groups, direct observations and interviews, typical of ethnographic fieldwork. The research also included innovative photo essays by students, who were invited to explain the distinctiveness of chosen moments and locations. The authors include several of these striking photos in *Navigating Conflict*, so that readers can begin to understand the perspectives of the youth who completed these photo-narrative essays (see, e.g., 191). The authors also chronicled twenty-one case studies—concrete examples of students encountering trouble, making choices about how to respond, and explaining those responses afterward. One case study described a fight that took place between two students—an incident that was remarkable because of its relative rarity. The authors provide dozens of pages detailing a range of perspectives, including both those of students and of the adults who were operating within the formal system(s) available to the students in the context of the fight and its aftermath. This kind of rich data invites readers to appreciate the highly contextual nature of many of the students' experiences and choices. Finally, the research includes fascinating map-drawing exercises, in which more than one hundred youth participants—over several years—created cartographic representations of the school, along with comments explaining how they perceived the interactions that might lead to conflict, its management, or its avoidance (see, e.g., 39). The specific instructions for the students (“draw the places they know well on campus and place themselves and the social groups on their maps that they typically see during free periods,” 233) reflect the open-ended nature of the authors' inquiries.

These maps were particularly effective in allowing the youth to make the most persuasive case for the importance of “anchored fluidity” in their conflict-management systems (117). The students reliably identified specific places within the school where different kinds of trouble were more (or less) likely to occur, where interactions with different groups were most common, and where “cooling off” was most likely, for example. The authors observed that for many—but not all—of the years of their study, students at this high school operated with a range of different geographic options. The students had choices throughout the day about where to be (and at least in many cases, who to be near and who to avoid). For example, the school's layout provided students with a “downtown,” a high-energy gathering for a cross section of youth. The downtown included backstage areas, often (but not always) with more homogeneous gatherings of youth, serving almost a staging function (with lines drawn principally along racial or ethnic identities or

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country of origin). The school included multiple other areas of relative calm, respite, or even “sanctuary” (205). And many viewed their campus as “peppered”—“in their local parlance ... [a recognition by students of] campus space marked by peers of different social identities as well as the continual movement of such markers and rituals for gaining entrance to groups and places” (202–03). This combination of spaces, the authors observed, permitted students a highly functional level of agency—the ability to move between different places as an integral part of the process of navigating trouble or potential trouble. Particularly as compared to other schools with similar student populations, the school upon which this book focuses reported dramatically fewer incidents of violence or other trouble during the early years of the study. Broadly speaking, the authors credited the existence of long-standing social trust among youth and this anchored fluidity of the student experience. In the authors’ words,

Anchored fluidity, including prevalent crossing of sociocultural lines, stands out as distinct when compared to most prior studies of high-poverty schools that show them beset by intense ethnic and neighborhood territoriality and social distrust at the intergroup and institutional levels. (45)

During the course of the authors’ study, the ascendance of the so-called safe schools approach to managing public schools throughout the United States (including the one in the authors’ study) challenged the positive dynamics the authors had been observing. The new, zero-tolerance, control-based approach to school management flew in the face of the anchored fluidity the authors had observed and had credited with so much success. Many who worked in the school predicted that the restrictive policies, aimed at a kind of aggressive student behavior that until then had not been the norm, would result in *more* trouble. Take away the backstage areas, take away the sanctuary areas, and force all students into a single, more concentrated location. What would one expect? Likening the newly created setting to “the proverbial prison yard,” the authors reported the description of one student:

During lunch, you can’t listen to the radio. They took away the basketball court. All you can do is sit there. You can’t have no fun at lunch ... [C]an’t move around campus at any time, really. Now there is nothing really to do except ... wait for something to happen. (189)

Ping-pong tables were removed. Security cameras were installed. Participation in social trust-building activities—such as student

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clubs—decreased. Incidents of trouble increased. Within this changed structure, there were examples of informal resistance and adaptation. A security guard looked the other way because he knew a student to be struggling with a challenge on a particular day. A teacher kept misplacing signage announcing new, more restrictive policies. Ultimately, as happened at many schools across the United States, the influence of the safe schools movement waned, and many of the dynamics that had made this high school a contested, but ultimately successful, place reemerged.

For those in the dispute resolution community, *Navigating Conflict* offers both challenge and support. The authors are plainly familiar with the traditional academic categories one finds to describe, for example, possible responses to conflict. But rather than adopt categories proposed by Laura Nader (or any other theorist), the authors permit the youth themselves to express their own experiences on their own terms. One can almost see the authors handing the pens to the students, who describe “workin’ it out,” “putting [others] in their place,” and “dealing with the system.” The youth who contributed to the study distinguish “conflict” from “beefs” from “troubles” (58). They acknowledge the distinction between the cultures “of the street” and of the school, and they offer a perspective on how each influences the other (119). They speak in moralistic terms, in rational terms, in precedential terms, and in relational terms. One *could*, of course, read each of these responses and perspectives as falling within one of the commonly accepted categories offered by modern conflict theorists. The brilliant invitation from the book’s authors, however, is that we listen anew, as a means of appreciating the range of choices (or lack thereof) perceived by those on the front lines.

At times, the book struggles to balance its multiple, ambitious goals. Having decided to include nearly two dozen case studies, the authors necessarily had to limit the level of detail in their descriptions of the cases and their contexts. From a reader’s perspective, the stories are so compelling that it was hard not to want more about each. On occasion, the authors stopped short of providing the full foundation one might expect for some of their more sweeping conclusions. For example, they characterized the imposition of “disciplinary and administrative control practices” as “institutional racism” (180–81). One can easily imagine racism to have been at the heart of the decisions, but the data the authors provide leave readers short. Similarly, the authors assert that their findings contradict neoliberal inclinations to reduce youth decisions to cost-benefit analyses (see 140, 224–26). This claim is not central to the authors’ most important points, and one can imagine their findings supporting alternative interpretations about the inclusion of “symbolic

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judgments about ... fairness and, ultimately, social trust” (139) in policy development and trade-offs. Finally, the authors situate the safe schools movement within a national context dating to the 1980s—one they describe as including “crime prevention in schools, victim rights, and peer mediation” (170). Many in the dispute resolution community would be surprised to find peer mediation on this list and the authors do not provide a detailed explanation for its inclusion.

As with any successful and provocative research undertaking, there are a number of ways in which enthusiastic readers might want more from the authors. One wonders, for example, if the study were continued, what we might learn about the effects on social trust of the changing norms of social media. One wonders about the effects on anchored fluidity in schools where active-shooter drills are commonplace. I wish that the authors had been able to translate their findings in a way that would make them well-crafted not only for colleges of education, but also for boards of education, school administrators, and those engaged on the ground in public education. In the end, however, as with any worthwhile project in the tradition of law and society, the authors explore an overlapping, often muddled combination of national forces, local policies, and particular actors. The authors largely avoid over-arguing their case and instead invite readers to appreciate the interplay of these factors. That they did not document and argue each of the potential aspects of all these complexities is not only understandable, but also an example of authorial mercy.

*Navigating Conflict* ultimately presents a rare example of scholarly congruence. The book’s authors make a full-throated argument on behalf of the *importance* of youth having agency—a voice and some control—over their fates as they encounter troubles in school. These same authors simultaneously *provide* agency to the youth themselves. Through the design of their research and the articulation of their findings, Morrill and Musheno make the students the centerpiece of the book. The students create their own images, construct their own categories, share their own observations, and articulate their own lessons. The result is a beautiful and instructive model—and an important contribution to the literature on modern conflict.