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Decoding Interpersonal Communication in Land Dispute Mediation: A Meaning Management Perspective from Indonesia's Agrarian Sector

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of interpersonal communication within land dispute mediation practices at the Land Office in Pariaman City, Indonesia. Rooted in the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory, the research explores how communicative interactions verbal and non-verbal affect the resolution process of agrarian disputes, particularly in contexts shaped by overlapping legal systems and customary norms. Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed via NVivo 12. The results underscore the pivotal role of empathetic communication, trust-building, and meaning coordination in achieving agreement. However, communication breakdowns rooted in cultural misalignments and power asymmetries often lead to mediation failure. This study contributes to theoretical development by expanding the application of CMM in legal-institutional settings and offers practical implications for capacity-building among mediators.

Keywords: *Interpersonal Communication, Mediation, Land Dispute, Coordinated Meaning, CMM Theory, Agrarian Conflict, Indonesia.*

Introduction

Land conflict in Indonesia represents a multifaceted challenge entrenched in the intersection of historical ownership claims, inconsistent legal frameworks, and enduring customary practices. The city of Pariaman, located in West Sumatra, is emblematic of this dynamic due to the coexistence of state recognized land ownership and communal customary (ulayat) land systems. With increased economic development and urbanization, tensions over land rights have intensified, necessitating institutional mechanisms for peaceful resolution. The Land Office of Pariaman (Kantor Pertanahan) plays a pivotal role in managing these disputes through non litigation avenues, particularly mediation.

However, empirical data from 2020–2024 reveal that the success rate of land mediation in Pariaman remains low. Out of 47 cases, 39 failed to reach a settlement, highlighting a critical problem in dispute resolution practices. A preliminary investigation points to ineffective communication between disputing parties and mediators as a major contributor to these failures. This phenomenon underscores the urgent need to understand how interpersonal communication both its verbal and non-verbal dimensions functions within the mediation process.

Interpersonal communication is not merely a technical aspect of mediation; it is a determinant

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of relational dynamics, trust, and shared understanding. It becomes especially complex when embedded in social hierarchies, cultural protocols, and divergent worldviews between parties. Mediators must not only be legally competent but also adept at managing emotions, clarifying meanings, and reducing tensions.

Globally, conflict over land tenure is intensifying. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2023), disputes over land access and ownership are increasing in Southeast Asia due to urban expansion, infrastructure projects, and overlapping legal claims. Indonesia is among the countries with the highest rates of unresolved land disputes. This makes the effectiveness of mediation processes increasingly urgent for legal certainty and social stability.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that effective interpersonal communication is essential in facilitating dispute resolution. Kalenga and Mahomed (2022) highlight that culturally grounded communication reduces resistance in land conflict mediation. Their research in South Africa shows that when mediators adopt contextually aware language and symbols, the likelihood of resolution increases significantly. These findings suggest that a similar culturally sensitive approach may benefit Indonesian mediation processes.

Moreover, communication challenges are exacerbated by digital illiteracy and generational gaps in understanding legal terminology. Aryawan et al. (2023) found that many disputants in rural Indonesia struggle to interpret formal mediation protocols due to unfamiliar legal jargon and hierarchical discourse patterns. This widens the communication gap between parties and formal institutions and often results in distrust or withdrawal from the process.

In the post-pandemic period, digital and hybrid mediation methods are increasingly explored. Yet, this shift presents new obstacles. According to Moreno and van de Mierop (2023), virtual mediation reduces non-verbal richness and weakens relational cues essential to building trust. For a context like Pariaman, where non-verbal and communal engagement are deeply embedded in customary practices, reliance on digital platforms may inadvertently hinder rather than help mediation effectiveness.

Theoretically, this research employs Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) as an analytical framework to examine how meaning is constructed and negotiated through interpersonal communication. Developed by Pearce and Cronen (1980), CMM allows for multi-layered analysis—ranging from speech acts and relationships to cultural scripts and societal narratives. By applying CMM to land dispute mediation, the study aims to enrich our understanding of how communicative acts contribute to either conflict escalation or resolution.

This article aims to fill the scholarly gap in conflict communication literature by contextualizing CMM theory within Indonesia's unique land dispute environment. It also provides empirical insights that can inform policy reforms, training for land officials, and the broader discourse on conflict resolution in developing countries. The ultimate objective is to enhance the efficacy of mediation as a sustainable conflict resolution tool.

Literature Review

Interpersonal communication is a core pillar of human interaction that significantly affects mediation outcomes. It encompasses both verbal messages spoken language, tone, phrasing and non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, body posture, and silence. According to DeVito (2019), interpersonal communication facilitates understanding and builds emotional connections. In mediation contexts, these communication elements help establish empathy,

Land dispute mediation represents a structured yet flexible method of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) that prioritizes dialogue over litigation. Charlton and Spencer (2012) outline five key principles of mediation: neutrality, confidentiality, voluntariness, empowerment, and mutual agreement. These principles form the ethical and procedural foundation upon which interpersonal interactions in mediation must be built. In the Indonesian context, Ministerial Regulation No. 20/2021 and Supreme Court Regulation No. 1/2016 institutionalize these values and standardize mediation procedures.

Yet, mediation in land conflict often extends beyond procedural compliance to deeply emotional and identity-laden negotiations. Rakhmaniar (2023) emphasizes that non-verbal cues significantly influence how trust and credibility are perceived during mediation. For example, sustained eye contact may build rapport, while closed body language may signal resistance or distrust. These subtle indicators are often decisive in the early phases of conflict resolution.

To explore the intricacies of meaning-making in interpersonal exchanges, Pearce and Cronen’s (1980) Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory becomes instrumental. The theory posits that communication is a layered process involving content, speech acts, relational dynamics, life scripts, and cultural norms. It enables the researcher to interpret not only what is said but how it is framed and received across social contexts. CMM is especially suitable for settings like Pariaman, where land disputes are influenced by intersecting legal, cultural, and historical narratives. This theoretical model is illustrated in Figure 1, presenting the layered structure of communication as applied in the mediation process.

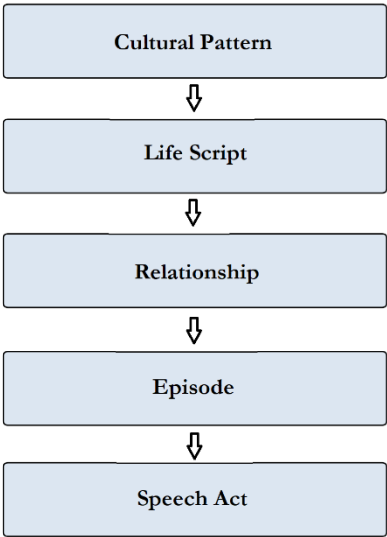


Figure 1. Layered CMM Framework in Land Dispute Mediation

Recent studies (Abed et al., 2023; Aryawan et al., 2023) demonstrate that interpersonal communication correlates positively with problem-solving, professional growth, and conflict de-escalation. However, there is a dearth of literature linking these findings to land dispute mediation in Indonesia. This study therefore contributes to a growing body of cross-disciplinary work in communication, law, and sociology, addressing a gap in localized empirical research on

how interpersonal interactions determine mediation outcomes in agrarian societies.

Furthermore, intercultural communication theory offers additional insights into the dynamics of land conflict. Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2018) stress that cultural worldviews influence communicative behavior, especially in conflict-prone interactions. Misalignment of cultural scripts between disputants and mediators may result in incompatible expectations and interpretations. Incorporating intercultural competence into mediation strategies is therefore essential for effectiveness in pluralistic societies.

Research in the digital communication domain also shows emerging trends that impact mediation. Moreno and van de Mieroop (2023) argue that while digital platforms increase accessibility to mediation services, they also risk diluting the interpersonal richness that face-to-face interaction provides. In land mediation where trust and perception are central loss of physical presence can lead to misunderstandings. This concern is particularly relevant to rural Indonesian contexts, where traditional communication norms persist.

In terms of emotional regulation, Bush and Folger (2020) suggest that transformative mediation relies heavily on the mediator's ability to manage and redirect emotional energy constructively. Emotional expressions during mediation are not to be suppressed but rechanneled towards mutual understanding. This perspective aligns with the CMM emphasis on life scripts and emotional context in framing communication acts.

Finally, legal-linguistic studies show that the use of formal or bureaucratic language can create barriers in mediation, especially for parties with limited literacy. Aryawan et al. (2023) show that simplifying legal jargon and adapting to local dialects not only enhances understanding but also empowers parties to actively engage. Hence, mediators must possess not just legal fluency but also linguistic flexibility and sociolinguistic awareness.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach grounded in a case study design to gain a comprehensive understanding of interpersonal communication in land dispute mediation. The study was conducted at the Land Office of Pariaman City, where a diverse range of land conflict cases are handled annually. The selection of this site was based on its active role in mediating complex disputes involving both state and customary claims. The theoretical framework guiding the inquiry is the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), which allows exploration of how meaning is co-constructed during mediation sessions.

Data were gathered through three main techniques: non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The observation process involved attending selected mediation sessions without active participation, thereby ensuring minimal influence on the natural flow of communication. Key aspects noted during observation included tone, pacing, body language, turn-taking, and emotional expressions among mediators and parties.

The in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 informants, comprising certified mediators, disputing parties, and administrative staff. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent. The questions focused on participants' experiences, communication strategies used during mediation, perceptions of communication effectiveness, and cultural considerations. These interviews were transcribed and imported into NVivo 12 software for coding and thematic analysis.

Document analysis was used to complement field data and involved reviewing mediation

reports, procedural guidelines, case summaries, and regulatory documents such as Ministerial Regulation No. 20/2021. These texts provided institutional context and legal framing for the mediation processes.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. NVivo 12 was used to conduct axial coding, pattern coding, and visual mapping of themes related to communication dynamics. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data sources and member-checking with key informants to validate findings.

Results

The findings reveal several patterns of interpersonal communication that influence the success or failure of mediation. Successful mediations were marked by open dialogue, emotional intelligence, and active listening by the mediator. Mediators who demonstrated empathy and maintained a neutral tone were more likely to foster trust and cooperation. Verbal strategies included reframing emotionally charged statements and summarizing mutual interests, while non-verbal cues such as eye contact and relaxed posture helped de-escalate tensions. These key differences are summarized in Table 1 to illustrate how communication strategies vary between successful and failed mediation cases.

Aspect	Successful Case	Failed Case
Mediator Style	Empathetic, neutral, relationship-oriented	Directive, perceived as biased or distant
Communication Approach	Open-ended, inclusive, dialogic	Rigid, formal, one-way explanation
Use of Non-verbal Cues	Effective eye contact, nodding, open posture	Minimal cues, closed posture, disinterest
Cultural Sensitivity	High; mediator adapts to adat and local norms	Low; mediator ignores local customs
Trust Level	Strong trust between parties and mediator	Lack of trust; parties emotionally withdrawn
Outcome	Mutual agreement achieved, legally documented	Mediation failed, issue remains unresolved

Tabel 1. Comparative Summary of Successful and Failed Mediation Cases in Pariaman

Conversely, failed mediations often featured rigid communication, lack of emotional regulation, and dominant behavior from one or more parties. In such cases, mediators struggled to balance power dynamics or failed to establish credibility. Distrust and emotional defensiveness frequently led to repeated interruptions and unproductive confrontations. In one observed case, the mediator's inability to validate both parties' emotions resulted in complete withdrawal from one side.

Communication breakdowns were frequently linked to misunderstandings rooted in cultural differences. For instance, differences in interpreting customary law or adat between generations or ethnic groups created semantic ambiguity. Moreover, some parties perceived formal legal terminology as alienating or overly bureaucratic, which further distanced them from the process. This highlights the necessity of culturally adaptive communication.

The study also found that the structure of the mediation room and seating arrangements influenced interpersonal interactions. Physical distance between parties, the presence or absence of visual barriers, and the role of third-party observers subtly affected comfort levels and openness. Mediators who adjusted these factors tactfully were more successful in guiding dialogue.

Visual tools such as maps, historical land documents, and diagrams played a significant role in supporting verbal explanations. In successful mediations, these aids were used not merely as evidence, but as communicative bridges that helped clarify positions and reduce abstract disagreements. In contrast, over-reliance on documents in failed cases caused confusion when no interpretation or explanation accompanied their presentation.

Another theme that emerged was the impact of mediator identity and credibility on communication flow. Mediators perceived as impartial and knowledgeable were able to create a conducive communication climate. On the other hand, if one or both parties perceived the mediator to be biased or unfamiliar with local cultural nuances, resistance surfaced, often manifesting in non-cooperation or skepticism.

Trust emerged as a recurring factor that either enabled or obstructed communication. Mediators who spent time building rapport before formal sessions through informal chats or culturally resonant greetings were able to facilitate smoother interactions. This pre-mediation phase proved critical in reducing initial tensions and setting expectations, especially in disputes rooted in long-standing grievances.

Finally, emotions were both a challenge and a catalyst. When mediators allowed space for parties to express anger, disappointment, or fear constructively, emotional release contributed to mutual understanding. However, in the absence of emotional containment strategies, escalated emotions led to the deterioration of dialogue. This finding reinforces the necessity for emotional regulation techniques as part of the mediator's communicative toolkit.

Discussion

The findings validate the central thesis of CMM theory, namely that meaning in communication is co-created across multiple layers and influenced by relational, cultural, and situational contexts. Mediators who managed to coordinate meaning successfully between disputing parties were able to transform adversarial interactions into collaborative dialogue. This supports Cronen and Pearce's assertion that communication is constitutive of social realities.

One significant implication is the need to reconceptualize mediation as more than a procedural or legalistic exercise. In the Pariaman context, where disputes often have emotional and historical depth, the mediator's role extends to that of a cultural translator and emotional guide. This aligns with the transformative mediation model advocated by Bush and Folger (2020), which prioritizes relationship building over mere settlement.

Moreover, the results reinforce the idea that effective communication must consider both content (what is said) and process (how it is said). Mediators must be trained in active listening, empathy, and non-verbal sensitivity. Standardizing such competencies in national mediation training curricula can improve the success rate of land dispute resolution, particularly in culturally diverse regions of Indonesia.

The study also reveals that structural power asymmetries between disputing parties complicate communication. Wealthier or more literate parties often dominate the dialogue, while

marginalized groups may struggle to articulate their concerns. Without deliberate efforts by the mediator to create an inclusive space, these imbalances persist. Thus, equitable communication facilitation is a critical ethical imperative.

Lastly, the study contributes to the broader scholarship on intercultural communication and conflict resolution. It demonstrates how theories like CMM can be operationalized in real-world settings, offering practical tools to unpack the layers of misunderstanding and conflict. It also suggests avenues for future research, such as comparative studies across regions or integration with digital mediation platforms.

Conclusion

This study affirms that interpersonal communication is a critical component in the mediation of land disputes, particularly in pluralistic societies like Indonesia. Using the lens of CMM theory, the research elucidates how the co-construction of meaning between mediators and parties determines the success or failure of mediation processes. Empathetic, inclusive, and culturally competent communication emerges as a vital determinant of mediation outcomes.

Despite institutional support and procedural guidelines, the success of mediation ultimately hinges on human factors. Mediators must possess not only legal knowledge but also soft skills such as emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and communication dexterity. Failure to address these elements can perpetuate distrust and escalate conflict.

The findings have significant implications for policy and practice. Training modules for land mediators should incorporate communication theory and intercultural competence alongside legal doctrine. Institutions like the Land Office must also create physical and organizational spaces conducive to open dialogue and trust-building.

In terms of theory, the study extends the application of CMM into formal legal-institutional settings, thereby enriching our understanding of how meaning is negotiated in complex social contexts. It bridges communication theory and conflict resolution, contributing to both disciplines.

Future research should explore the scalability of these findings across other regions and types of disputes. Moreover, the integration of digital technologies into mediation practices raises new questions about how meaning is constructed in virtual environments a domain ripe for exploration.

Recommendation

Based on the findings and discussions presented in this study, several recommendations are proposed to improve the practice of land dispute mediation through enhanced interpersonal communication strategies:

First, it is crucial for land offices across Indonesia to institutionalize formal training programs in interpersonal communication for mediators. These programs should include modules on active listening, empathy, non-verbal communication, and cultural sensitivity. Incorporating CMM theory into these trainings can provide mediators with the conceptual tools to understand how meaning is co-created and how misunderstandings can be prevented or resolved.

Second, policy reforms at the national and local levels should mandate the integration of cultural mediators or facilitators in cases involving customary land (ulayat). These individuals, often respected figures within the community, can act as bridges between disputing parties and formal

mediators, helping to contextualize communication and prevent semantic or cultural misinterpretations.

Third, there should be greater investment in communication support tools such as visual aids, simplified language versions of legal texts, and multilingual translation services. These tools can help parties better understand the mediation process and their rights within it. Additionally, mediation spaces should be designed to promote openness, equality, and comfort, minimizing hierarchical or adversarial atmospheres.

Fourth, the Ministry of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning/National Land Agency (ATR/BPN) should develop a national database of mediation outcomes and best practices. This database would allow for data-driven improvements in mediation procedures and provide a repository of successful communication strategies that can be shared across regions.

Finally, further academic research should explore the use of digital technologies in facilitating culturally sensitive mediation. Pilot projects involving blended (offline and online) communication models should be tested in rural and urban settings. Evaluating their effectiveness will be critical to determining whether virtual mediation can be a viable complement to traditional face-to-face interactions in the Indonesian context.

These recommendations are intended not only to strengthen interpersonal communication in mediation but also to support broader goals of equitable land governance, legal empowerment, and social justice in Indonesia.

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