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# The Design as intragroup conflict mediator

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## Abstract

Service Design presents new challenges in its practice as we widen the complexity of its activity scope. Among the many issues to be dealt with, complexity may be associated to carrying out multidisciplinary workgroups, where people from different areas of a company, social group leaders, specialists with specific knowledge, all have a say during the group process by applying their technical skills and distinct viewpoints to solve a problem. The dialectics that happen in such work debates generate conflict situations, which can be interesting creative drivers, thus requiring the designer to uphold a specific expertise to mediate them. This article proposes a course of action to mediate intragroup conflict in Service Design projects, supported by knowledge from the fields of Group Psychology and Topological Psychology.

Keywords: Service Design, Conflict Mediation, Group Psychology

## Introduction

Designers nowadays are required to attain new knowledge. One example is the challenge one faces dealing with other skills when seeking to work in Service Design, which aim is to solve problems by way of collaborative methods that involve clients, as well as service development teams (Stickdorn, et al., 2018). The result of such collective action can be to suggest new business models.

One of the barriers that can hinder the desired collective workflow is the fact that, for the formation of a collaborative group, does not assume the need for individuals to get to know each other beforehand. Therefore, it becomes necessary for the designer to adopt strategies to deal with group work, which often presents situations in which conflicting points of view generate tension in the relationships between the group members, compromising the formation of the bonds necessary to obtain the benefits. of collective work.

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With highly participative dynamics, projects gain complexity while the search for a solution advances, generating growth opportunities for all participants involved. On the other hand, when we fail to notice the need for active communication between the work group, we may lose member participation as far as decision making is not effectively mediated. In this way, the course of a project ends up excluding a more active participation of its members, downsizing the intellectual richness provided by collaborative processes.

The necessity to bring forth divergence to process design is represented in the Double Diamond, creating a first moment in which we seek to discover valuable content obtained by the diversity of points of view to reveal the possibilities to be worked on. In a second moment, this content diversity needs to converge so the process evolves within the group. In this exact moment when divergencies are heightened, the designer can act more thoroughly as a mediator for the consolidation of something desired, valuing the work group and advancing the project process. However, if there is no one able to act as mediator, the conflicts that booster good insights may be avoided, since they are associated to something negative and undesirable for the group project practice.

Mediating conflicts involves several instances. First, we need to understand the efforts of the individuals to keep themselves active participants in the process, which is not an easy task when working in group and coming from different work context positions. Second, there is a need to create a group environment where everyone feels free and at easy to actively participate in the process. And third, we need to understand the interests and desires expressed by the participants in the form of texts or in metalanguage to find convergence points that lead to the solution in good terms of the issues raised. Finally, there is a need to work with extreme care regarding the mediation of the expectations of the desired outcomes, so there is no frustration by the end of the project, to avoid the experience of "projecting with" becoming something frustrating or of little interest, which may discourage people from delving into future endeavors. Figure 1 illustrates the assumptions that underlie the need for a mediator role in collective design practice.

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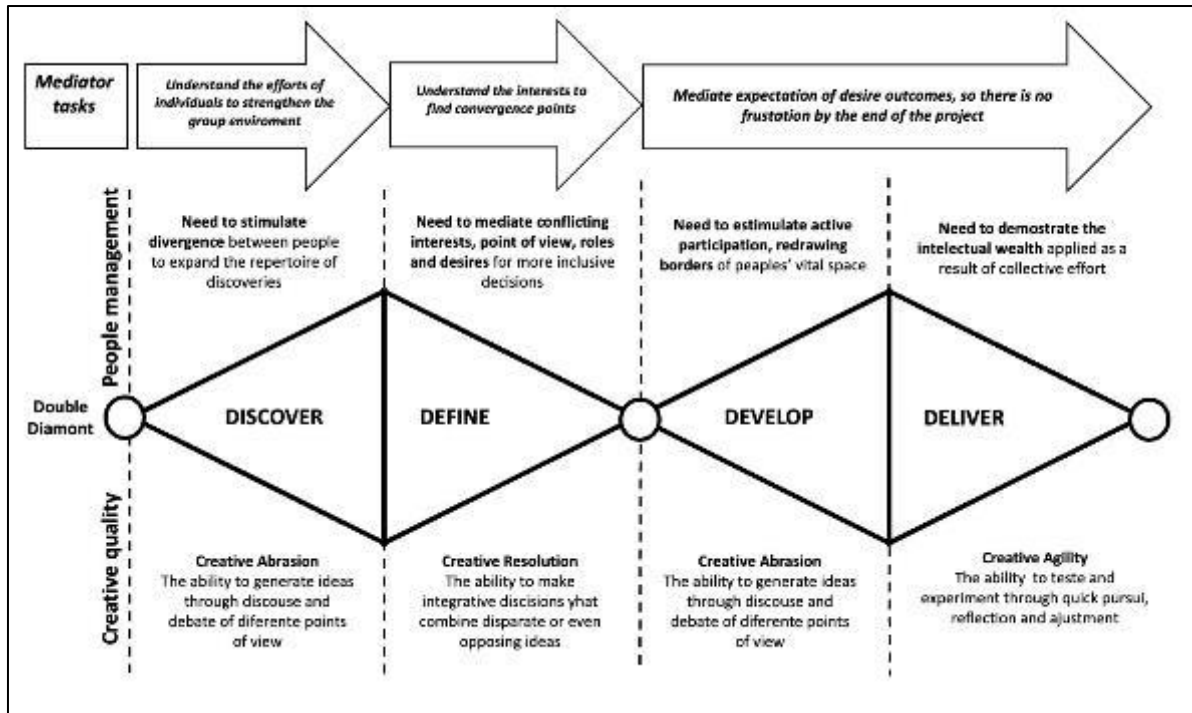Livework

Figure 1. Diagram of assumptions applied to the Double Diamond by Gilberto Mendes

With the aforementioned propositions, this article offers reasons for the importance of designers in work group practices to gain knowledge in the field of human behavior. For that, we rely on the conceptual contribution of structuralist Kurt Lewin (1936) in the field of Topological Psychology; the successful experience of Enrique Pichón-Riviere (1958) with work groups that he called Operative Groups; and the foundational work of Sigmund Freud who always pointed out the importance of analyzing individual motivations and the influence of groups and institutions in the construction of individualities, more specifically in his work Group Psicology (1921).

## The practice of Service Design and the occurrence of conflict

If we analyse the project situation from Buchanan's (1992) perspective, a problem can be understood as a multifaceted situation which, according to an observer's point of view, finds different ways of solving it. However, a proposed solution that is presumably promising can create new problems that need to be thought about from another dimension of the state of things.

The multidisciplinary character attributed to Service Design assigns it the condition of a thought articulator, aligning interests and desires to then shape the advances settled by the work group. When we work in a group, the discussions reveal the

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thoughts of individuals whose thesis and antithesis are essential, through dialectical thinking, to attain synthesis, although tentative, but which can guide and create, progressively, new possible pathways. Afterwards, via group decision making, one form of evolving with their work will be chosen.

In this way, the dialectical thinking present in conflicts can be an interesting creative driver, since according to Linda A. Hill, in her book Collective Genius, The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation (2014), three abilities are necessary for groups to actively work in the construction of innovative ideas:

- Creative Abrasion, the ability to generate ideas through debate and discussion of different point of views;
- Creative Resolution, the ability to integrate opposite ideas through mediation and interests;
- Creative Agility, the ability to rapidly test through experiments so the group can reflect and reach their own conclusions.

For Linda A. Hill, conflict is a motivational initiator, which extracts from individuals not their belligerent behavior but their argumentative intellectual capacity, thus creating a beneficial dialectics that leverage the level of intragroup discussion, contributing for the group to build more creative and innovative solutions.

## The structures of work groups

According to Japiassu (1976), the fragmentation of knowledge created a divide of the intellectual space in closed compartments, more and more restrictive, representing modalities of psychosociological obstacles that can compromise group work flow, thus creating intellectual ghettos to the extent that as its expertise is recognized it can transform itself into a fortress and consequentially in domination over a territory, with different mental models of perceptions of the difficulties of the ones outside this area of knowledge. Working in multidisciplinary groups entails understanding these territories, full of obstacles that hinder fostering a trajectory sufficiently geared towards project practice. It is not a coincidence that many designers illustrating the Design process make use of a graphical representation known as the Design Squiggle (Damien Newman, 2002), as seen in Figure 2.

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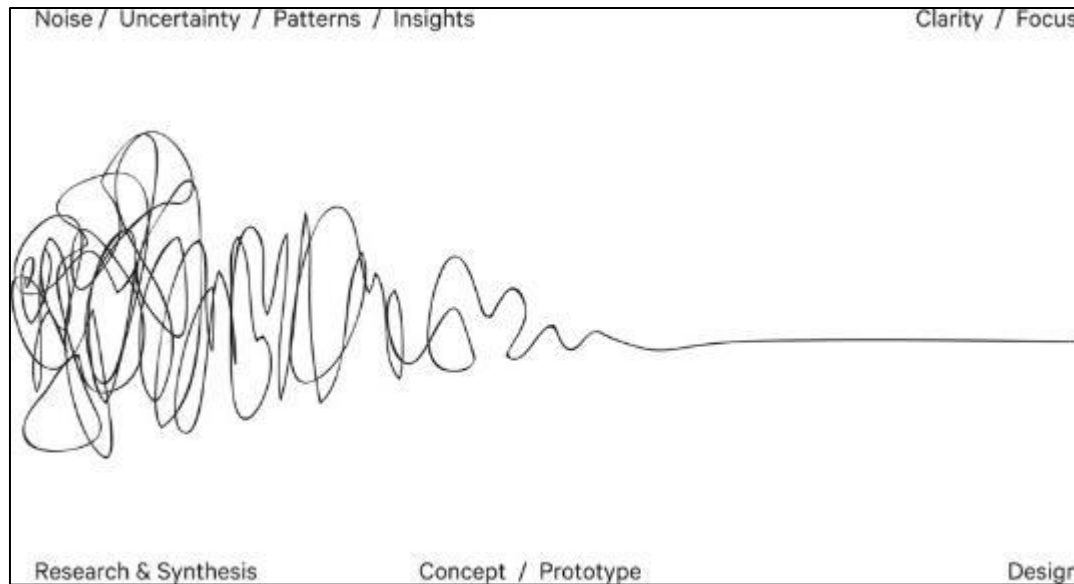DAD | PUC-Rio Pontifícia Universidade Católica Do Rio De Janeiro
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Figure 2. Design Squiggle by Damien Newman

On the other hand, group process under the perception of Enrique Pichon-Rivière (1907-1977) seeks to understand work group by considering such group as an operative structure, an association of people connected in time and space, articulated by mutual internal representation, which entails, explicitly or implicitly, a task, interacting in a network of roles with the establishment of ties among themselves (Pichón-Rivière, 1980).

This theory attaches great importance to the establishment of social ties, which are the basis for communication processes and learning, considering human beings as fundamentally social subjects. The keyword in Pichón theory is dialectics, which in modern perception would be a way of thinking the contradictions of reality, understanding the real as essentially contradictory and in permanent transformation (Konder,2008). Such dialectics can be understood through the following principles:

- Reality is contradictory – for each given element there is an element that negates it, since the contradictory interpenetrate each other;
- The negation of negation – if there is a thesis, there is an element that contradicts it, an antithesis, of which the group seeks the synthesis so an evolution of the group can happen. This process creates a spiral in the form of an inverted cone that amplifies group knowledge at each dialectic process that takes place among group members, as seen in Figure 2;
- The transformation of quantity in quality – the group movement that happens aiming at creating modifications (exchanges) in group structure, by overcoming intragroup differences and increasing the repertoire of possibilities

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of structuring and restructuring the task at hand. These changing movements during tasks are exactly the ones that improve the quality of the operative group and, therefore, provide better task performance.

The group process presented by Pichón proposes a way of understanding group structure and functioning based on five pairs of universal contradictories of his theory:

- The Old versus the New
- The Necessity versus Satisfaction
- The Explicit versus the Implicit
- The Subject versus the Group
- The Project versus the Resistance

So, the group learning process takes place through a permanent movement of structuring, restructuring, and restructuring, as shown in Figure 3.
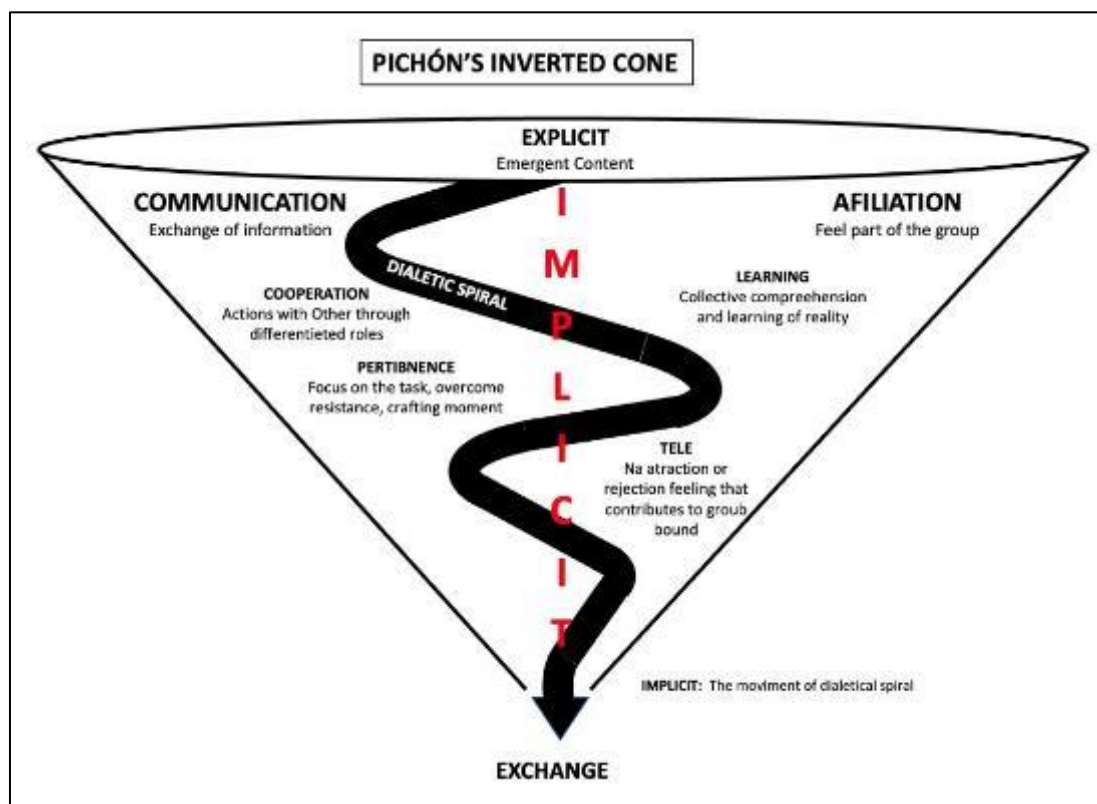


Figure 3. Pichón's Inverted Cone, by Gilberto Mendes.

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In this way, the chaotic drawing of the Design Squiggle representation, under the view of Operative Groups, can be better understood as a group creation method, which requires the mediation of the contradictories to evolve in its project trajectory.

## Individuals' behaviors in work groups

Observing the motivations of work group members is one way of identifying the stimulus of their operative motivations. Usually, when a person acts according to a tension state resulting from a conflict between a desire to be fulfilled and possible obstacles that interpose between such desire and the gratifying object, we say they are motivated to the realization the desire. Similarly, when someone revives a bad experience, they develop a repulsive behavior in relation to that object that caused discomfort, escaping, avoiding, or even deleting this hostile occasion. However, in both cases, the subject is always motivated, either for collaborating with the group or boycotting it. Freud, in Project for a Scientific Psychology, written in 1985, and in its final work from 1938, Outline of Psychoanalysis, had already approached the explanation of motivational conflict situations, a theme also discussed in Kurt Lewin's work on Topological Psychology. A correspondence between them is in MamedeNeves (1972).

Initially, tending to these desires or intentions were brought up by each participant, and they originated from different necessity sources, not always consistent. But, through the work steered by the moderator, in Pichón terms, there is a progressive production of structuration and restructuration of the group project, as the synthesis of individual aspirations keeps conflict at productive levels, reducing the ongoing tension.

In relation to group process cycle, it will never be steady, but only semi-steady in the terms proposed by von Bertallanfy (1968), since it is subjected to changes that never allow it to return to its original state. We agree with what Lewin calls "the vital space of the totality of facts that determine the behavior of an individual in a given moment" (K Lewin, 1973 pg. 29). Therefore, paraphrasing him, we consider that a "vital space of a group" will go through $n$ transformations throughout its time horizon, although with the help of an attentive group facilitator, it will always keep its elements engaged and conflict of ideas minimized, offering better results to the intended task. Figure 4 illustrates this thought schematically.

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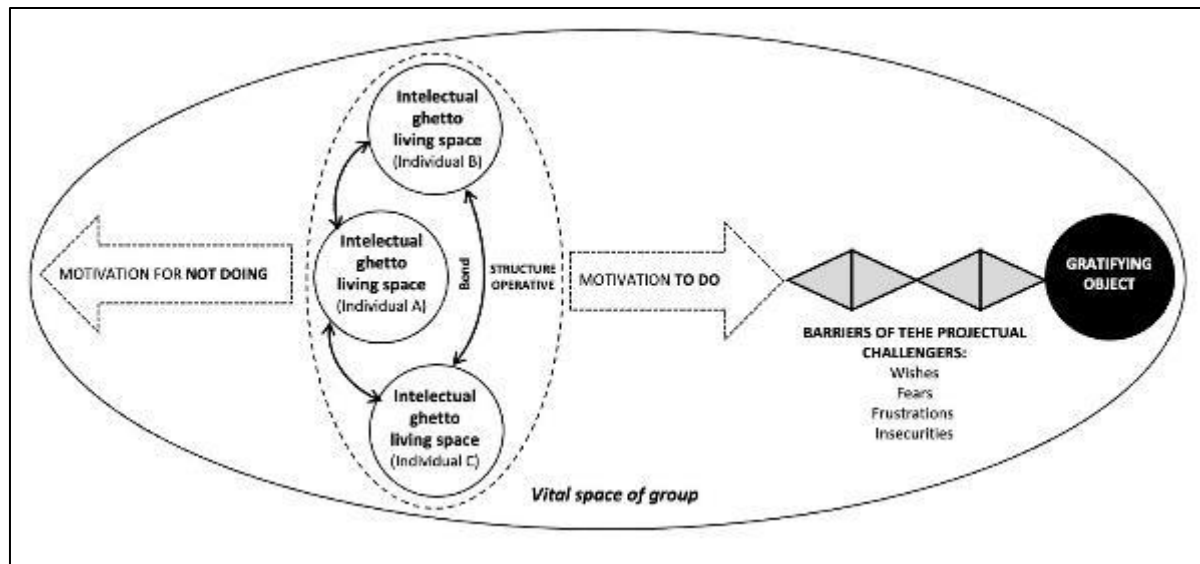DAD | PUC-Rio Pontifícia Universidade Católica Do Rio De Janeiro
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Figure 4. The vital field of the workgroup, by Gilberto Mendes

The group process that works operatively over a task will progressively create new group structures, and the completion of the project initiated will be the synthesis of the group's desire, but never of only one person.

## Conclusion

This article emphasizes the need for understanding behavioral issues implicit in work groups so that conflict mediation is performed skillfully, based on the authors referenced in this work and their lines of thought.

Lewin's vital space theory makes us reflect on the territory where each individual owns the field that surrounds them, and they feel encouraged to move and articulate their contributions as a member of an operative group. The content present in this territory brings to the group not only technical knowledge, but also implicit content of one's life history. For this individual, the work group can represent the possibility of fulfilling their wishes, sketching in their imaginary their own trajectory that interferes in the way they interact with other members of the group. Mapping the topology of this transit space where the trajectory is delineated by the individual is important for identifying the directions that bolster the continuity of dialogue and the strengthening of ties among group members. The role of the mediator of intragroup conflicts involves understanding these possible trajectories, considering that a linear space may not translate what Topological Psychology has to offer as a repertoire of choices for mediation since this view is spatial and not flat.

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Regarding the perspective of Pichón's operative groups, we can conclude that the explicit is represented in the group formation objective, revealing only the part that each individual brings to the group relating to their knowledge field. Although, located in the *implicit*, the contradictories that influence the trajectory of the dialectical spiral, on which the group work widens their repertoire by exchanging divergent points of views of its members. The interaction reveals not only the characteristics associated to technical abilities, but also what each one projects in what the group seeks to accomplish, drawing near to the motivational desires, either to do something or, even if unconsciously, to boycott some type of activity. Figure 5 summarizes the authors' relevant points for conflict mediation in work groups.

| WHO | WHAT | WHY |
|---|---|---|
| *Kurt Lewin* | **Topological Psychology** | It makes us reflect on the territory that the individual has, a field that **surrounds him and that he feels encouraged to move and articulate his contributions** as a member of a group. |
| *Enrique Pichón* | **Operative Groups** | It makes us understand, through the interaction of individuals, the trajectory of the dialectical spiral revealing motivational **desires to do something or even to boycott some type of activity.** |
| **Sigmund Freud** | **Individual Motivations** | It makes us understand the motivational conflicts of individuals when exposed to the need to perform a task, where **motivation has valences for both directions: that of doing (impulse of desire) or of not doing (impulse of repulsion), the latter being able to be understood as demotivation.** |

Figure 5. Authors and their contributions to conflict mediation, by Gilberto Mendes

The intragroup conflicts can be associated to the notion that motivations only create vectors in the direction of doing something approximate and "when we do not want to do it", meaning that is no motivation in acting in this manner. The group dynamics is always in a continuous movement of structuring and restructuring, requiring someone to perform the mediation, so the group does not rupture, and particularly to figure out the best trajectory to follow.

Recognizing the existence of this complex topological system entails that the role of the mediator be that of an attentive person, skillful in their functions, observing the group and its members from different viewpoints, so that they can understand the role of each member and the whole group in operation.

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This may suggest that for acting as a mediator of intragroup conflict, we need to pay attention not only to decision making reasons of the aspects held in the field of Explicit Project (what to do, why doing it, when doing it, for whom to do it). The contextualization of implicit meanings that arise as group members interact to accomplish tasks may reveal the individual's intimate territory, in which feelings such as desire, fear, frustration, insecurity, among other are presented in a covert manner, as a "quasi mute zone", which requires ability to perceive them. Locating them can determine the trajectory of the group evolution.

We assume that attributing a linear path to Service Design does not translate what Topological Psychology has to offer as a repertoire of choices of ways for mediation, since this vision is spatial and not flat. Thinking in this systemic form can bring into light the hypothesis on how to carry out mediation processes of intragroup conflicts and predict possible territories of conflict that we will need to elaborate as an operative group.

Understanding group work through this perspective allows us to realize that Service Design cannot be represented as a trajectory over a flat surface or over a volumetric object in the form of a cone. We need to look beyond, as a structure that expands or constricts on the limits of contradictories that a group debates throughout its work process, as illustrated in Figure 6. The understanding of this project process is only attained through multiple images, as seen in Figure 7, which appear at every new way we look at what we are projecting.
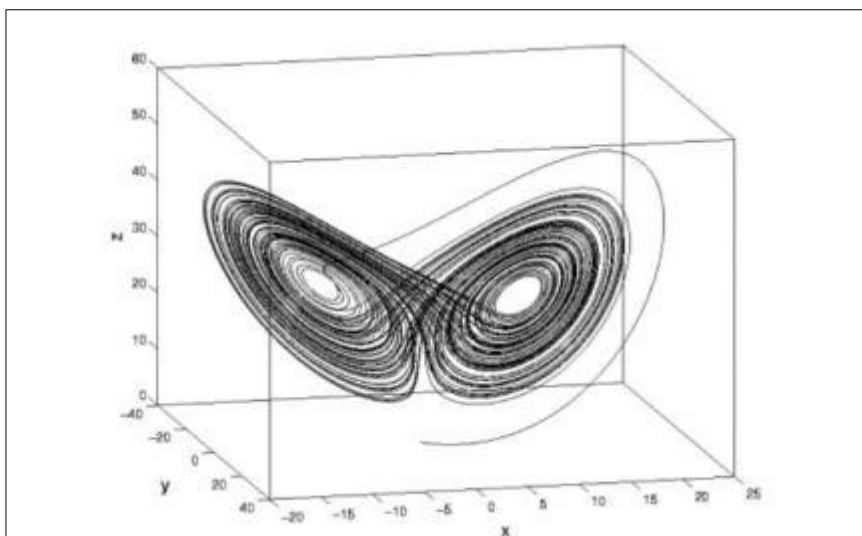


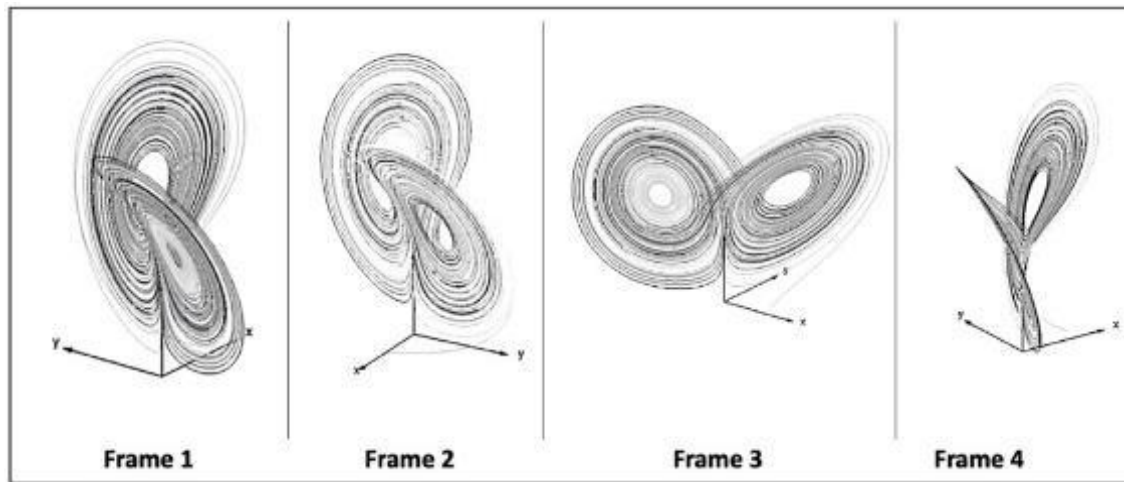Figure 6. Representation of a nonlinear system (Atractor de Lorenz).

Figure 7. The System seen in different moments and points of view.

The path to this trajectory is topological and when we represent a conflict situation, we are taking a picture of a location where we have chosen to start the mediation process, but as the process initiates, new frames are generated so the mediator can find new nonlinear trajectories, although necessarily following the flow signaled by the group structure.

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