

THE MARTIN FRAMEWORK

A Culturally Responsive Approach to Community Mediation in Singapore's Multi-Racial Society

This article sets out the MARTIN framework, a practice-grounded approach tailored to Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious setting. It offers a structured yet adaptable six-phase sequence: (a) Mindful Engagement; (b) Assessment of Entrenchment; (c) Reframing Perspectives; (d) Transformative Dialogue; (e) Interest-Based Solutions; and (f) Nurturing Commitment. Two case illustrations follow: one on cooking odours ("curry dispute") and the other on use of shared corridors. They demonstrate how culturally sensitive process design can build readiness to engage, reduce defensiveness, and support workable, face-preserving arrangements.

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I. Introduction

1 Community mediation in Singapore sits at the intersection of density, diversity and everyday life. In close quarters, ordinary routines can grate. Religious observances, food aromas, corridor use, and family rhythms become shared experiences rather than private choices. Most neighbours accommodate each other; some do not. When relationships harden, mediators work with culture, identity, and concerns about face alongside interests and options. Here, "face" refers to a person's social standing in the eyes of others and the need to avoid public diminishment; face-concerns often shape willingness to speak, apologise or concede in mixed-cultural settings.¹

2 This article presents the MARTIN framework as a practice-grounded approach for such cases. Designed for Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious setting, it blends cultural literacy, psychologically informed de-entrenchment, and relationship repair across six phases:

1 Angela K-Y Leung & Dov Cohen, "Within- And Between-Culture Variation: Individual Differences and the Cultural Logics of Honor, Face, and Dignity Cultures" (2011) 100(3) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 507.

(a) Mindful Engagement; (b) Assessment of Entrenchment; (c) Reframing Perspectives; (d) Transformative Dialogue; (e) Interest-Based Solutions; and (f) Nurturing Commitment.²

3 Two commitments shape the contribution. First, treat culture as foundational: needs linked to face, religious practices, language preferences, and communication styles are process variables, not background. Second, address psychology directly. Parties bring loss aversion, reactive devaluation, and confirmation bias. The framework proposes routes to loosen these trenches without humiliation.

4 A brief orientation to Singapore's community-mediation landscape precedes the framework. Part III of this article sets out the phases of the MARTIN framework; Part IV applies them to two recurrent neighbourhood disputes: cooking odours and the use of shared corridors. The aim is practical: to equip mediators for their next session.

5 The framework does not claim universality. It is tailored to Singapore and is best read as scaffolding rather than script; nor does it guarantee settlement. Sometimes the most responsible outcome is safer communication and a workable plan for living alongside difference.

II. Community mediation in Singapore: a brief orientation

A. *Institutional architecture*

6 Community mediation is delivered primarily through the Community Mediation Centre, with the Community Disputes Resolution Act 2015³ providing a tribunal pathway via the Community Disputes Resolution Tribunals ("CDRTs") when matters cannot be settled. A recent ministry profile noted that the Housing and Development Board ("HDB") received about 11,400 noise-related feedback cases between January and September 2020, roughly 3,600 more than in the same period in 2019, underscoring the value of upstream resolution.⁴

B. *Shift to pre-filing mediation*

7 In 2024, Parliament passed amendments to the Community Disputes Resolution Act 2015. The scheme now encourages and, in many instances,

2 Kevin Avruch, *Culture and Conflict Resolution* (United States Institute of Peace, 2003); Stella Ting-Toomey & John G Oetzel, *Managing Intercultural Conflict Effectively* (SAGE Publications, 2001).

3 2020 Rev Ed.

4 Ministry of Law, "Getting to the Heart of Community Conflicts" (18 March 2022) <<https://insight.mlaw.gov.sg/articles/our-people/2022-03-18-getting-to-the-heart-of-community-conflicts/>> (accessed 18 September 2025).

requires, an attempt at mediation before filing a claim at the CDRTs, subject to limited waivers where mediation is unsuitable. This moves community mediation from a purely voluntary step to a structured pre-action gateway in appropriate cases.⁵ Court user guidance and subsidiary legislation issued in 2025 reinforce this pre-filing pathway. Scholarly commentary has long noted the tension between voluntariness and court-connected schemes, and outlines safeguards to protect party self-determination.⁶

C. *Community Relations Unit*

8 Government has also established a Community Relations Unit (“CRU”) within the enhanced Community Disputes Management Framework to tackle a minority of severe cases, such as persistent noise or hoarding.⁷ Community Relations Officers coordinate targeted interventions. The CRU is not a first responder for all disputes. It is intended for complex matters that require coordinated action, and it sits upstream of adjudication while working in tandem with community mediation.

D. *Implications for practice*

(1) *Intake and readiness*

9 With pre-filing mediation now being the general requirement in CDRT cases, more reluctant parties will arrive. This sits within the wider debate on mandatory mediation and the need for suitability screening and proportionate opt-outs.⁸ Expect defensiveness; plan for swift psychological safety in culturally mixed dyads.

5 Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, “Community Disputes Management Framework” (27 May 2025) <<https://www.mccy.gov.sg/sectors/community/community-disputes-management-framework/>> (accessed 18 September 2025); Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Law, opening speech for Second Reading of Community Disputes Resolution (Amendment) Bill (15 November 2024) <<https://www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/opening-speech-for-second-reading-of-community-disputes-resolution--amendment--bill>> (accessed 18 September 2025); Koh Wan Ting, “New Govt Unit to Investigate Severe Neighbour Disputes, Could Deploy Noise Sensors Under Proposed Law”, *CNA* (12 August 2024) <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/noise-sensors-neighbour-disputes-community-relations-unit-4541501>> (accessed 18 September 2025).

6 Dorcas Quek Anderson, “Mandatory Mediation: An Oxymoron? Examining the Feasibility of Implementing a Court-Mandated Mediation Program” (2010) 11(2) *Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution* 479.

7 Ministry of National Development, “Community Relations Unit (CRU)” <<https://www.mnd.gov.sg/our-work/ensuring-high-quality-living-environment/community-relations-unit>> (accessed 18 September 2025).

8 Dorcas Quek Anderson, “Mandatory Mediation: An Oxymoron? Examining the Feasibility of Implementing a Court-Mandated Mediation Program” (2010) 11(2) *Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution* 479; Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Law, opening speech for Second Reading of Community Disputes Resolution (Amendment) Bill (15 November 2024) <<https://www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/opening-speech-for-second-reading-of-community-disputes-resolution--amendment--bill>> (accessed 18 September 2025).

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(2) *Process design in a mixed ecosystem*

10 Some cases will sit within a wider management plan that involves the CRU or grassroots partners. The mediation process should clarify roles, avoid duplication, and, where helpful, complement CRU actions. Gentle reality-testing helps parties understand what mediation can and cannot achieve relative to regulatory steps.

(3) *Standards of success*

11 Settlement matters, yet in culturally charged disputes, durable coexistence can depend more on face-preserving arrangements, incremental exposure, and simple communication routines than on maximalist bargains.

E. *Positioning the MARTIN framework*

12 Against this backdrop, the MARTIN framework emphasises culturally attuned rapport, surfaces needs without rushing to bargains, offers face-preserving ways to shift position, and ends with routines for living together.

III. The MARTIN framework

A. *Theoretical foundations and influences*

13 The MARTIN framework synthesises mediation theory, psychological insights on entrenchment, and cultural communication scholarship, adjusted for Singapore's multi-racial setting.

14 Interest-based negotiation offers the basic move from positions to interests in a way that can be culturally adapted for Singapore's context. Transformative and narrative contributions inform the emphasis on empowerment, recognition, and reframing. Cultural frameworks (including face and high-context communication) shape how people perceive and respond to conflict in Singapore's multi-racial setting.

15 These strands are integrated into a practice-oriented scaffold rather than presented as theory for its own sake. The aim is pragmatic: culturally literate rapport-building, techniques that loosen entrenched stances without humiliation, and option-building that preserves dignity and improves daily coexistence.

B. Core principles and values

16 The framework is guided by core principles and values that shape community mediation in Singapore's diverse society. These reflect universal mediation ethics alongside Singapore-specific considerations: cultural resonance; relationship preservation; face-saving mechanisms; psychological de-entrenchment; adaptive facilitation; cultural integration; and practical implementation.

(a) Cultural resonance: The framework recognises and respects the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of parties in Singapore's multi-racial society. Effective mediation should align with parties' cultural values, communication styles, and conflict-resolution preferences rather than impose an ill-fitting approach.

(b) Relationship preservation: Reflecting traditional values of harmony and community, the framework prioritises the maintenance and improvement of relationships between parties. This principle is particularly relevant in Singapore's high-density living environment, where parties often must continue to coexist in close proximity after mediation. Unlike disputes where parties can disengage, neighbours in HDB flats must find ways to live together. Relationship outcomes are therefore as important as specific agreements.

(c) Face-saving mechanisms: The framework incorporates techniques that allow parties to retreat from entrenched positions without losing dignity or "face". This principle acknowledges the importance of face ("*mianzi*") in Chinese culture and similar concepts in Malay and Indian cultures, where social recognition and reputation are highly valued.⁹ Face concerns are deeply embedded in social psychology and can determine whether mediation succeeds in Singapore's context. Neglecting them can undermine the process.¹⁰

(d) Psychological de-entrenchment: The framework utilises evidence-based psychological techniques to help parties recognise and move beyond defensive positions. This principle addresses the common challenge of entrenchment in community disputes, where parties often become emotionally invested in their positions. Entrenchment has both cognitive and emotional dimensions. Addressing both dimensions is essential for effective mediation.

9 Stella Ting-Toomey & John G Oetzel, *Managing Intercultural Conflict Effectively* (SAGE Publications, 2001); Angela K-Y Leung & Dov Cohen, "Within- And Between-Culture Variation: Individual Differences and the Cultural Logics of Honor, Face, and Dignity Cultures" (2011) 100(3) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 507.

10 Lim Lan Yuan, "Mediation Styles and Approaches in Asian Culture", paper presented at the 2nd Asia-Pacific Mediation Forum, Singapore (2003) <<https://www.asiapacificmediationforum.org/resources/2003/limlanyuan.pdf>> (accessed 18 September 2025).

(e) Adaptive facilitation: The framework balances facilitative and evaluative approaches based on cultural expectations and case needs. This principle recognises that some parties in Singapore may expect mediators to be more active and directive than in Western facilitative models, while maintaining mediator neutrality. The framework rejects a one-size-fits-all approach and encourages adaptability to cultural context and specific case dynamics.¹¹

(f) Cultural integration: The framework promotes mutual understanding and respect across cultural differences, contributing to broader goals of cultural integration in Singapore's diverse society. This principle aligns with Singapore's national emphasis on racial harmony and multi-cultural appreciation. Effective mediation should not only resolve the immediate dispute but also contribute to the broader goal of a cohesive multi-cultural society.

(g) Practical implementation: The framework emphasises solutions that are practically implementable in Singapore's community context, particularly in high-density public-housing environments. This principle ensures that mediated agreements address real-world constraints and opportunities. Elegant theories that cannot be implemented in practice have little value to parties living in close quarters with limited resources; practicality matters.

17 These core principles and values provide the foundation for the MARTIN framework's structure and process, guiding mediators in their facilitation of community disputes in Singapore's multi-racial context. They reflect both universal mediation values and Singapore-specific considerations. This combination makes the framework particularly suitable for its intended context.

C. *The MARTIN framework structure and process*

18 The MARTIN framework is structured around six interconnected phases, represented by the acronym MARTIN: Mindful Engagement; Assessment of Entrenchment; Reframing Perspectives; Transformative Dialogue; Interest-Based Solutions; and Nurturing Commitment. Each phase incorporates specific techniques and considerations tailored to Singapore's multi-racial context.

11 Lim Lan Yuan, "Mediation Styles and Approaches in Asian Culture", paper presented at the 2nd Asia-Pacific Mediation Forum, Singapore (2003) <<https://www.asiapacificmediationforum.org/resources/2003/limlanyuan.pdf>> (accessed 18 September 2025).

(1) *Mindful Engagement*

19 The Mindful Engagement phase focuses on creating psychological safety and establishing rapport with all parties through culturally appropriate communication. Key elements include:

- (a) Using appropriate greetings and honorifics: Small gestures build early rapport and signal respect.
- (b) Meeting parties separately at the outset: Private preliminaries surface concerns in a low-threat setting and reduce defensiveness.
- (c) Acknowledging cultural and religious commitments: Schedule around observances and show respect for identities to build trust.
- (d) Beginning with brief, culturally attuned small talk: Avoid abrupt entry into conflict and prepare the ground for dialogue.
- (e) Demonstrating sincerity: Convey a genuine desire to help parties reach resolution, not merely to run a procedure.

20 This phase establishes the foundation for effective mediation by creating culturally appropriate psychological safety and rapport, essential for parties to engage meaningfully in the process. Without this foundation, subsequent phases are unlikely to succeed, which makes Mindful Engagement a critical first step in the MARTIN framework. This groundwork also helps counter confirmation bias and other selective-interpretation tendencies, reducing defensiveness and improving openness to later reframing.¹²

(2) *Assessment of Entrenchment*

21 The Assessment of Entrenchment phase involves identifying the emotional “trenches” that parties have dug and understanding the cultural and psychological factors influencing their positions. Key elements include:

- (a) mapping positions and underlying interests, noting how culture shapes expression;
- (b) identifying identity-linked practices that may reinforce entrenchment;
- (c) anticipating face-risk for each party and avoiding likely triggers;
- (d) capturing relationship dynamics including history, hierarchy, and patterns that fuel the conflict; and

12 Raymond S Nickerson, “Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises” (1998) 2(2) *Review of General Psychology* 175.

- (e) gauging the depth of entrenchment and selecting suitable levers for movement.

22 This phase provides mediators with a comprehensive understanding of the dispute's dimensions, including the cultural and psychological factors that must be addressed to help parties move beyond entrenched positions. It is a diagnostic phase that informs the mediator's strategy for subsequent phases. This ensures that interventions are tailored to the specific dynamics of the dispute.

(3) *Reframing Perspectives*

23 The Reframing Perspectives phase focuses on helping parties analyse their own positions and consider alternative perspectives through culturally sensitive techniques. Key elements include:

- (a) using Socratic questioning adapted to communication styles to prompt reflection;
- (b) facilitating perspective-taking to loosen attachment to positions;
- (c) translating positions into interests so core needs can be met in multiple ways;
- (d) normalising cultural style differences so they are read as patterns, not personal slights; and
- (e) offering low-commitment trials that let parties test alternatives without loss of face.

24 This phase helps parties gain distance from their entrenched positions and begin to see the dispute from broader perspectives, including cultural dimensions they may not have previously considered. It is a transformative phase that shifts parties from positional thinking toward interest-based exploration. This prepares the ground for more constructive dialogue.

(4) *Transformative Dialogue*

25 The Transformative Dialogue phase facilitates controlled communication between parties to enhance understanding and recognition across cultural differences. It aims to lower emotional arousal, address identity and face concerns, and build readiness for interest-based problem solving, consistent with guidance on managing emotionally charged conflicts.¹³ Key elements include:

13 Daniel Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable: How to Resolve Your Most Emotionally Charged Conflicts* (Penguin Books, 2016).

- (a) facilitating structured exchange with clear guidelines adapted to cultural communication norms;
- (b) serving as a cultural interpreter when necessary to bridge perspectives and styles;
- (c) promoting recognition by encouraging acknowledgment of each other's legitimate needs and perspectives with sensitivity to face concerns;
- (d) identifying shared values such as family well-being, community harmony and mutual respect to provide common ground; and
- (e) facilitating relationship repair through culturally appropriate reconciliation practices, reflecting the emphasis on relationships.

(5) *Interest-Based Solutions*

26 The Interest-Based Solutions phase involves collaborative generation and testing of options that meet underlying needs while respecting face, identity, and practical constraints. The mediator facilitates co-creation, reality-tests proposals against day-to-day routines, and aligns solutions with cultural and religious considerations. Key elements include:

- (a) generating options collaboratively, reflecting cultural preferences in decision making and shifting from adversarial stance to joint problem solving;
- (b) screening proposals for cultural or religious friction; the mediator shows why this matters;
- (c) testing options against community harmony; this is consistent with Singapore's emphasis on racial cohesion;
- (d) building face-preserving elements so all parties can agree with dignity; and
- (e) planning implementation details that work in dense public-housing routines.

27 This phase produces solutions that address core needs, are workable in the parties' daily lives, and preserve dignity. The mediator checks feasibility, reciprocity, and proportionality; drafts specific, observable commitments with timelines and contingencies; and ensures that language is culturally appropriate and non-stigmatising.

(6) *Nurturing Commitment*

28 The Nurturing Commitment phase focuses on solidifying agreements and establishing sustainable patterns for future interaction. Key elements include:

- (a) reinforcing agreements with appropriate rituals or gestures;
- (b) setting follow-up routines that are culturally sensitive and easy to use;
- (c) establishing simple channels for future concerns;
- (d) linking parties to community resources that sustain change; and
- (e) acknowledging success in ways that reinforce harmony.

29 This phase ensures that the resolution is sustainable and contributes to improved relationships and community harmony beyond the immediate dispute. It is a forward-looking phase that transforms a point-in-time agreement into an ongoing process of peaceful coexistence. This is essential in Singapore's high-density, multi-racial living environment.

30 Effective practice begins by stabilising the room, normalising close-living friction and setting respectful ground rules. Early in the conversation, clarify non-negotiables, identity stakes, outside audiences and time pressures. Reframe accusations into daily-life impact statements and anchor the discussion to shared values such as good neighbourliness and living well side by side. When drafting terms, express commitments as observable actions with clear locations, times and thresholds, and include a neutral communication channel for raising concerns. This keeps agreements face-preserving and self-executing.

D. Unique features for Singapore's context

31 The MARTIN framework incorporates several features designed specifically for Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious context. These features distinguish it from generic approaches and make it particularly suitable for community disputes in Singapore.¹⁴

(1) Cultural and religious sensitivity

32 The framework emphasises cultural and religious sensitivity through several specific features:

- (a) Cultural knowledge base: Mediators are equipped with knowledge of Singapore's major cultural and religious traditions, including Chinese, Malay, Indian, and other communities' practices, values, and sensitivities. This knowledge base helps mediators

14 Dean G Pruitt, "Process and Outcome in Community Mediation" (1995) 11(4) *Negotiation Journal* 365; Lim Lan Yuan, "Mediation Styles and Approaches in Asian Culture", paper presented at the 2nd Asia-Pacific Mediation Forum, Singapore (2003) <<https://www.asiapacificmediationforum.org/resources/2003/limlanyuan.pdf>> (accessed 18 September 2025).

recognise and respect cultural dimensions of disputes, which is essential for effective facilitation in Singapore's diverse society.

(b) Communication style adaptation: The framework provides guidance on adapting communication approaches to different cultural styles, from the more indirect, high-context communication common in Chinese and Malay cultures to the more expressive styles often found in Indian communities. This adaptation helps mediators connect effectively with parties from diverse cultural backgrounds and helps avoid communication mismatches that could undermine the process.

(c) Religious practice accommodation: Mediators are trained to recognise and accommodate religious practices and constraints, such as prayer times, dietary restrictions, and religious observances, in the mediation process. This accommodation shows respect for parties' religious identities and needs, creating an inclusive process that works for all participants.

(d) Traditional element incorporation: The framework incorporates elements from traditional conflict-resolution approaches in Chinese, Malay, Indian, and other communities, creating cultural resonance for parties from diverse backgrounds. This incorporation helps parties feel that the process respects their cultural heritage and is not simply imposing a Western model on their dispute.¹⁵

(e) Multi-lingual capability: The framework emphasises the importance of language accessibility, including the use of interpreters or bilingual mediators when necessary to ensure full participation. This capability ensures that language differences do not create barriers to effective participation, which is a critical consideration in Singapore's multi-lingual society.

(2) *Psychological de-entrenchment techniques*

33 The framework includes specialised psychological techniques for helping parties move beyond entrenched positions, adapted to Singapore's cultural context.

(a) Culturally appropriate emotional expression: Techniques for facilitating controlled emotional expression that respect cultural norms around emotional display, which vary across Singapore's ethnic groups. These techniques help parties process emotions without breaching cultural norms. This is a delicate balance that calls for cultural sensitivity.

15 Lim Lan Yuan, "Mediation Styles and Approaches in Asian Culture", paper presented at the 2nd Asia-Pacific Mediation Forum, Singapore (2003) <<https://www.asiapacificmediationforum.org/resources/2003/limlanyuan.pdf>> (accessed 18 September 2025).

(b) Cognitive reframing with cultural sensitivity: Approaches to cognitive reframing that acknowledge and work with cultural worldviews rather than challenging them directly. These approaches help parties consider alternative perspectives without feeling that their cultural values are being questioned. This reduces defensive reactions.

(c) Culturally adapted perspective taking: Perspective-taking exercises that account for cultural differences in how empathy is expressed and understood. These exercises help parties understand each other's viewpoints within their own cultural contexts, rather than imposing a universal model of empathy.

(d) Gradual exposure techniques: Methods for gradually exposing parties to alternative viewpoints in ways that minimise defensive reactions, adapted to different cultural communication styles. These techniques recognise that entrenchment often yields to incremental rather than sudden change. The process should be culturally calibrated.

(e) Face-saving exit ramps: Specific techniques that allow parties to step back from entrenched positions without losing face, which is particularly salient in many Singaporean contexts. These exit ramps help parties move toward agreement without feeling that they have capitulated or been defeated, and address the social dimension of position change.¹⁶

(3) *Relationship-focused outcomes*

34 The framework emphasises outcomes that preserve and enhance relationships, reflecting relational norms salient in many Singaporean contexts:

(a) Harmony restoration emphasis: Focus on restoring harmony in the community as a primary goal and reflecting traditional values across Singapore's ethnic groups. This emphasis aligns with cultural preferences for social harmony over individual vindication, a value orientation common across Singapore's diverse communities.

(b) Coexistence solutions: Develop practical arrangements that enable continued coexistence in close proximity, which is essential in Singapore's high-density housing environment. These solutions acknowledge the reality that neighbours must continue to live near each other, which makes relationship outcomes as important as specific terms.

16 Lim Lan Yuan, "Mediation Styles and Approaches in Asian Culture", paper presented at the 2nd Asia-Pacific Mediation Forum, Singapore (2003) <<https://www.asiapacificmediationforum.org/resources/2003/limlanyuan.pdf>> (accessed 18 September 2025).

(c) Face-saving outcome design: Carefully craft solutions that allow all parties to maintain dignity and face within their cultural communities. This design addresses the social dimension of agreements and ensures that resolutions do not create social costs for parties within their reference groups.

(d) Extended impact consideration: Attend to how resolutions affect not only the immediate parties but also extended family and community networks, reflecting the collectivist orientation of many Singaporean communities. This consideration acknowledges that disputes and their resolutions exist within social networks rather than between isolated individuals.

(e) Practical arrangement focus: Emphasise concrete, implementable arrangements for shared spaces and resources, addressing the practical realities of community living in Singapore. This focus ensures that agreements work in the real-world context of Singapore's high-density housing rather than remaining theoretical solutions that sound persuasive but do not function in practice.

35 These features distinguish the MARTIN framework from generic mediation approaches and make it particularly suitable for Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious context. They reflect both theoretical understanding and practical experience, creating a framework that is academically sound and practically effective.

E. Implementation guidelines

36 Effective implementation of the MARTIN framework requires attention to several key areas. These translate theoretical understanding into practical application:

(1) Mediator qualifications

37 Mediators implementing the MARTIN framework should possess or develop:

(a) Cultural competence: Knowledge of and sensitivity to Singapore's diverse cultural and religious traditions, including Chinese, Malay, Indian, and other communities' practices, values, and communication styles. This competence goes beyond superficial awareness to a deep understanding of how culture shapes conflict perceptions and resolution preferences, which is essential for effective cross-cultural mediation.

(b) Religious literacy: Understanding of major religious practices and sensitivities in Singapore, including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Taoism. This literacy helps mediators recognise when disputes involve religious dimensions

and address them with appropriate respect and sensitivity, preventing unintentional offence or misunderstanding.

(c) Psychological insight: Training in psychological techniques for addressing entrenched positions, including cognitive reframing, perspective taking, and emotion regulation. This insight helps mediators understand the psychological dynamics of entrenchment and apply appropriate techniques to help parties move beyond defensive positions, which is a critical skill for effective community mediation.

(d) Adaptive facilitation skills: Ability to balance between facilitative and evaluative approaches based on cultural expectations and case needs. This adaptability allows mediators to adjust their style to match cultural expectations and case dynamics, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach that might work in some contexts but fail in others.

(e) Relationship focus: Commitment to relationship preservation and improvement as a primary goal of mediation, reflecting relational norms salient in many Singaporean contexts. This focus helps mediators maintain attention on the relational dimension of disputes, which is particularly important in Singapore's high-density living environment where ongoing relationships are inevitable.

(2) *Process adaptations*

38 The implementation of the MARTIN framework may require several process adaptations.

(a) Flexible scheduling: Accommodate religious observances and cultural practices when scheduling mediation sessions, such as avoiding Muslim prayer times or important religious holidays. This flexibility shows respect for parties' religious and cultural commitments and creates an inclusive process that works for all participants.

(b) Venue considerations: Select mediation venues that are culturally neutral and comfortable for all parties, with attention to religious sensitivities, for example the availability of prayer spaces if needed. These considerations ensure that the physical environment supports rather than hinders the mediation process and creates comfort and safety for all participants.

(c) Language support: Provide interpretation or translation services when necessary, and select mediators with relevant language skills when possible. This support ensures that language differences do not create barriers to effective participation, which is a critical consideration in Singapore's multi-lingual society.

(d) Cultural hospitality: Incorporate culturally appropriate refreshments and hospitality practices that respect dietary restrictions and cultural preferences. These practices create a welcoming environment that acknowledges and respects cultural differences and represent a small but significant aspect of cultural sensitivity.

(e) Hierarchical sensitivity: Respect hierarchical considerations in multigenerational or status-differentiated disputes, which is particularly important in Asian cultural contexts. This sensitivity helps mediators navigate power dynamics and status differences that might otherwise undermine the mediation process. It also recognises that equality, in the Western sense, may not be the most effective approach in every Singaporean context.

(3) *Training and development*

39 The implementation of the MARTIN framework requires comprehensive training and ongoing development for mediators. Singapore-focused practitioner scholarship offers case-based insights that can be incorporated into training curricula.¹⁷

(a) Cultural intelligence training: Programmes to develop mediators' cultural knowledge, awareness, and skills for working across cultural differences. This training helps mediators build the cultural competence needed to implement the framework effectively, moving beyond generic mediation skills to culturally responsive approaches.

(b) Psychological technique development: Training in specific psychological approaches for addressing entrenched positions, adapted to Singapore's cultural context. This development helps mediators acquire the specialised skills needed to help parties overcome psychological barriers to resolution, which is a critical capability for effective community mediation.

(c) Case study analysis: Regular review and analysis of case studies to refine application of the framework in diverse situations. This analysis helps mediators learn from experience and develop a nuanced understanding of how the framework applies in different contexts, creating a learning community that continuously improves practice.

(d) Peer learning circles: Establishment of peer learning communities where mediators can share experiences and insights from applying the framework. These circles provide support, feedback, and collective wisdom, helping mediators navigate the

17 *Contemporary Issues in Mediation* vol 1 (Joel Lee & Marcus Lim eds) (World Scientific, 2016).

challenges of implementing a new approach and refine their skills through shared reflection.

(e) Continuous improvement: Ongoing evaluation and refinement of the framework based on mediator feedback and outcome assessments. This improvement ensures that the framework evolves in response to practice rather than remain static, and adapts to new insights and changing conditions.

40 Through attention to mediator qualifications, process adaptations, and ongoing training and development, the MARTIN framework can be implemented effectively in Singapore's community-mediation context. Implementation requires not only understanding the framework but also building the capabilities and systems needed to apply it in practice.

IV. Case studies

A. *The curry dispute: a cultural flashpoint*

(1) *Background and original outcome*

41 The "curry dispute" of 2011 is a widely discussed case in Singapore's community mediation history. It involved a Chinese immigrant family who complained about the smell of curry cooked by their Indian neighbours in an HDB flat. The Chinese family, recent arrivals from mainland China, found the unfamiliar cooking odours overwhelming. The Indian family viewed curry cooking as integral to cultural identity and traditional food practices, something they had done for years without complaint from previous neighbours.¹⁸

42 After mediation at the Community Mediation Centre, the agreement stipulated that the Indian family would cook curry only when the Chinese family was not at home and would keep their windows closed while cooking. Although this addressed the immediate concern, it later proved controversial in public discussion.

43 When the outcome became public, a backlash followed. Many saw the agreement as an unreasonable restriction on an established practice to appease newcomers. The "Cook and Share a Pot of Curry" campaign drew

18 Harry Suhartono, "Singaporeans' Culinary Anti-Immigration Protest: Curry" (22 August 2011) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/business/singaporeans-culinary-anti-immigration-protest-curry-idUSLNE77L010>> (accessed 18 September 2025); Sharon Teng, "Curry Dispute", *National Library Board* (11 May 2015) <<https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuiid=bcea3bb0-06d7-4ca6-8d9e-37a8bea0e1f3>> (accessed 18 September 2025); "Curry Dispute (2011)", *Wiki.sg* <[https://wiki.sg/p/Curry_dispute_\(2011\)](https://wiki.sg/p/Curry_dispute_(2011))> (accessed 18 September 2025).

tens of thousands of supporters and reframed the dispute as a question of integration and accommodation.

44 The agreement addressed the smell complaint but not the cultural asymmetries. It privileged newcomer preferences and left underlying tensions unresolved, which the public quickly identified.

(2) *Application of the MARTIN framework*

45 Had the MARTIN framework been applied to the curry dispute, the approach and likely outcome would have differed. The following analysis considers how each component of the framework could have addressed this culturally charged conflict.

(a) Mindful Engagement

46 The mediator would begin by creating psychological safety through culturally appropriate engagement with both families. For the Indian family, this could include acknowledging the cultural significance of curry in Indian cuisine and identity, rather than treating it as a “smell problem”. For the Chinese family, the mediator would recognise their unfamiliarity with the local environment and the genuine discomfort they experienced. The mediator would validate their feelings without endorsing their proposed solution.

47 Private preliminary sessions would allow each family to express their concerns without immediate confrontation. The Indian family could explain the cultural and religious significance of their cooking practices, while the Chinese family could express their difficulty adjusting to unfamiliar sensory experiences in their new home. These sessions would reveal the deeper cultural dimensions of what might otherwise be framed as a simple nuisance dispute.

48 The mediator would demonstrate cultural knowledge and respect by acknowledging relevant cultural contexts. For example, the mediator might note that curry has a long history in Singapore and is enjoyed by many Singaporeans across ethnic groups, while also recognising that adapting to a new cultural environment can be challenging for recent immigrants. This balanced acknowledgement would set the stage for a more culturally sensitive mediation process.

(b) Assessment of Entrenchment

49 The mediator would identify the Indian family’s “trench” as the protection of cultural identity and traditional practices, with curry cooking as a salient symbol. Their position may be entrenched because the complaint is perceived as an attack on identity and as a suggestion that long-standing practices should be curtailed to accommodate newcomers. Awareness of

belonging to one of Singapore's founding ethnic communities may reinforce this stance.

50 The Chinese family's "trench" concerns the desire for a comfortable home environment free from unfamiliar and, to them, unpleasant odours. Their position may be entrenched because they are recent arrivals who are still adjusting to Singapore's multi-cultural environment, and because expectations formed in their previous living environment may differ from those in high-density, multi-ethnic housing in Singapore.

51 The mediator would analyse how cultural factors were influencing the entrenchment, recognising that for the Indian family, curry cooking was not merely a food preference but a cultural practice tied to identity and heritage. For the Chinese family, the reaction to curry smells reflected not just sensory discomfort but the broader challenges of cultural adaptation and integration into a new society.

(c) Reframing Perspectives

52 The mediator would help both families reflect on their positions through culturally sensitive questioning. The Indian family might be asked to recall their own experiences of adapting to unfamiliar practices or environments, encouraging empathy for the adjustment challenges faced by new immigrants. The Chinese family might be asked about aspects of Singapore's multi-cultural environment they have enjoyed or appreciated, helping them see beyond the immediate discomfort to the enriching aspects of cultural diversity.

53 The mediator would facilitate emotional detachment by helping both families distinguish between the specific issue (cooking smells) and broader cultural identities. The Indian family would be encouraged to see that accommodating neighbours doesn't diminish their cultural identity, while the Chinese family would be helped to understand that their discomfort is part of a normal adjustment process, not a permanent condition requiring others to significantly alter their practices.

54 Cultural bridging would be employed to help both families understand how cultural backgrounds influence their perceptions and expectations. The mediator might explain that, in Singapore's multi-cultural context, mutual accommodation and cultural learning are valued in community living.¹⁹ Neither complete restriction nor the unmodified continuation of practices is typically expected.

19 Lim Lan Yuan, "Mediation Styles and Approaches in Asian Culture", paper presented at the 2nd Asia-Pacific Mediation Forum, Singapore (2003) <<https://www.asiapacificmediationforum.org/resources/2003/limlanyuan.pdf>> (accessed 18 September 2025).

(d) Transformative Dialogue

55 Once both families were prepared through the earlier phases, the mediator would facilitate a structured exchange between them, with clear guidelines for respectful communication. This might include opportunities for each family to share aspects of their cultural background and experiences, humanising each other beyond the dispute.

56 The mediator would serve as a cultural interpreter when necessary, helping parties understand each other's cultural perspectives and communication styles. This interpretation would help to bridge cultural gaps that might otherwise lead to misunderstanding and escalation.

57 The mediator would promote recognition by encouraging the Indian family to acknowledge the genuine discomfort experienced by their neighbours, while encouraging the Chinese family to recognise the importance of cultural practices and traditions. This mutual recognition provides a foundation for a more balanced and respectful resolution.

(e) Interest-Based Solutions

58 With improved understanding established, the mediator would facilitate collaborative brainstorming of potential solutions that address the interests of both families. Unlike the original outcome, these solutions would aim to balance accommodation rather than placing the burden primarily on one party.

59 Potential solutions might include:

- (a) the Indian family providing advance notice of their curry cooking days;
- (b) the Chinese family gradually increasing exposure to curry smells, perhaps starting with milder versions;
- (c) practical measures such as improved ventilation, air purifiers, or cooking during times when windows can be opened;
- (d) cultural exchange opportunities, such as the Indian family introducing the Chinese family to milder curry dishes to build familiarity and appreciation; and
- (e) community integration activities that help the Chinese family adapt to Singapore's multi-cultural environment.

60 These solutions would be evaluated against cultural considerations, ensuring they respect the Indian family's practices while addressing the Chinese family's comfort needs. They would also be assessed against standards of community harmony and mutual respect, avoiding one-sided restrictions that privilege one culture over another.

(f) Nurturing Commitment

61 Parties can record practical steps (such as ventilation routines and brief notice windows for stronger-odour dishes) so the arrangement is clear and workable in daily life.

62 If helpful, the families may draw on community resources that support cultural understanding (eg, neighbourhood events), while keeping the responsibility for day-to-day coordination between themselves.

(3) *Potential outcomes under the MARTIN framework*

63 Under the MARTIN framework, the outcome would likely differ from the original mediated agreement. Rather than restricting the Indian family's cooking to times when the Chinese family is absent, a more balanced and culturally sensitive resolution might emerge.

(a) Both families would gain cultural understanding and appreciation through education and shared experiences.

(b) Practical arrangements would be implemented, such as improved ventilation, agreed cooking times with advance notice, or the use of air purifiers.

(c) The Chinese family would gradually adapt to the local multi-cultural environment, perhaps starting with exposure to milder versions of curry.

(d) The Indian family would maintain their cultural practices while taking reasonable measures to minimise impact on their neighbours.

(e) Both parties would feel respected and understood, with their core needs addressed.

(f) Community harmony would be preserved and enhanced through mutual accommodation rather than one-sided restriction.

64 This outcome would better reflect Singapore's values of multiculturalism and mutual respect, avoiding the public backlash that followed the original mediation and contributing to the positive integration of new immigrants into Singapore's diverse society. It is not only about solving the immediate problem; it is also about doing so in a way that strengthens, rather than weakens, the social fabric.

B. *Common corridor dispute: space utilisation*

(1) *Background and scenario*

65 The use of common spaces, particularly HDB corridors, is a frequent source of disputes in Singapore's high-density public housing. With limited

private space, residents sometimes extend their living areas into corridors by placing plants, shoe racks, religious altars, or furniture. These practices can create friction with neighbours who share these spaces.

66 An elderly Malay couple lined the corridor with large potted plants; their Chinese neighbour complained about obstruction and mosquitoes and installed a sizeable shoe rack in response. Tensions escalated and the case came to mediation.

(2) *Application of the MARTIN framework*

(a) Mindful Engagement

67 The mediator would begin by creating psychological safety through culturally appropriate engagement with both parties. For the elderly Malay couple, this might include acknowledging the cultural value of gardening in Malay tradition and the importance of meaningful activities in retirement. For the Chinese neighbour, the mediator would recognise their concerns about access and safety in shared spaces.

68 Private preliminary sessions would allow each party to express their concerns without immediate confrontation. The Malay couple could explain the significance of their plants as both a hobby and a connection to their cultural background, perhaps sharing how gardening helps them cope with the limitations of apartment living. The Chinese neighbour could express their specific concerns about corridor access and mosquito breeding, as well as their perception of inconsistent enforcement of corridor regulations.

69 The mediator would demonstrate cultural knowledge by acknowledging relevant contexts. For example, both gardening and concerns about mosquito-borne diseases have cultural and practical significance in Singapore's context, and that negotiating shared space use is a common challenge in HDB living.

(b) Assessment of Entrenchment

70 The mediator would identify the Malay couple's "trench" as defending their retirement activity and cultural practice, which the plants represent. Their position might be entrenched due to the emotional investment in their plants, the time spent nurturing them, and the limited alternative spaces for gardening in HDB living. The perceived hypocrisy of their neighbour's shoe rack would further reinforce their resistance to compromise.

71 The Chinese neighbour's "trench" would involve their concerns about corridor accessibility and safety standards. Their position might be entrenched due to frustration with perceived selective enforcement of rules and possibly underlying cultural differences in space utilisation preferences. Their own shoe rack might represent a form of territorial marking in response to what they perceive as the couple's excessive use of shared space.

72 The mediator would analyse how cultural factors and age differences might be influencing the conflict, with the elderly Malay couple potentially viewing the corridor as an extension of community space (consistent with traditional kampong values) while the Chinese neighbour might view it more as a functional transit area that should remain largely clear (consistent with urban living norms).

(c) Reframing Perspectives

73 The mediator would help both parties reflect on their positions through culturally sensitive questioning. The Malay couple might be asked to consider how corridor accessibility affects their neighbour's daily life and whether some adjustments could maintain their gardening joy while addressing legitimate concerns. The Chinese neighbour might be encouraged to consider the significance of gardening for elderly residents and the benefits that plants bring to the shared environment.

74 Emotional detachment would be facilitated by helping both parties recognise that the conflict is not about personal disrespect but about navigating shared space in a dense living environment. This is a common challenge in Singapore's public housing. The mediator would help them look beyond the immediate irritation to the legitimate needs and preferences on both sides.

75 The mediator would translate positions to interests, identifying the Malay couple's core interest in maintaining a meaningful retirement activity and connection to nature, and the Chinese neighbour's core interest in ensuring safe passage and compliance with perceived community standards. This translation would reveal potential compatibility between these interests with appropriate arrangements.

(d) Transformative Dialogue

76 The mediator would facilitate a structured exchange between the parties, perhaps including a joint corridor walk-through to physically identify specific concerns and possibilities. This concrete approach would help move the discussion from abstract complaints to specific, addressable issues.

77 The mediator would promote recognition by encouraging the Malay couple to acknowledge their neighbour's legitimate access needs, and by encouraging the Chinese neighbour to recognise the psychological and cultural benefits the plants provide to the elderly couple. This mutual recognition would create the foundation for a more balanced and respectful resolution.

78 The mediator would identify shared values, such as pride in their shared living environment, desire for harmony with neighbours, and the importance of both personal expression and community standards. These

shared values would provide common ground for developing solutions that respect both parties' needs.

(e) Interest-Based Solutions

79 With improved understanding established, the mediator would facilitate collaborative brainstorming of potential solutions that address the interests of both parties. These might include:

- (a) rearrangement of plants to ensure a minimum corridor width that exceeds emergency requirements;
- (b) selection of plants that are less likely to attract mosquitoes or cause allergies;
- (c) regular maintenance schedule for the plants, including mosquito prevention measures;
- (d) agreed standards for both plant placement and shoe rack size/positioning;
- (e) potential sharing of gardening benefits, such as the Malay couple offering herbs or flowers to their Chinese neighbour; and
- (f) exploration of alternative spaces for some plants, such as community gardens or void deck greening initiatives.

80 These solutions would be evaluated for practical implementability in the HDB context, ensuring they comply with essential safety regulations while addressing both parties' core needs and preferences.

(f) Nurturing Commitment

81 To give the arrangement durability, the settlement would specify the minimum clear width, identify permissible placement zones and state a simple step the parties can take if the width is breached. These elements make the settlement self-executing.

82 The parties can maintain a neutral, text-first channel for raising concerns about shared-space use and, where useful, tap community avenues such as residents' groups, without external oversight being required for ordinary upkeep.

(3) *Potential outcomes under the MARTIN framework*

83 Under the MARTIN framework, the resolution of this common corridor dispute would likely include:

- (a) a reconfigured plant arrangement that maintains the couple's gardening activity while ensuring adequate corridor access;
- (b) agreed standards for both plant placement and shoe rack positioning;

- (c) improved understanding of each other's needs and cultural perspectives;
- (d) a sustainable pattern for addressing future concerns related to shared space use; and
- (e) potential community benefits from the couple's gardening knowledge and their neighbour's ideas for organising shoes.

84 This outcome would balance personal expression with community standards, demonstrating how the MARTIN framework can navigate conflicts over competing claims to limited shared resources in Singapore's high-density housing environment. It would contribute to neighbourhood harmony while allowing cultural expression within practical constraints. This is a balance that Singapore's diverse and space-limited society continually negotiates.

C. Cross-case insights: patterns and practice design

(1) Recurrent patterns in neighbour disputes

85 In high-density settings, ordinary routines such as work, rest and caregiving frequently intersect with practices that carry identity and meaning. Noise and odour concerns are seldom about decibels or smell alone; they often signify perceived respect, control or belonging. Health and safety claims often meet appeals to tradition, faith and dignity. Visibility within shared spaces also shapes judgment, so agreements that manage what is seen, when it is seen and how it is contained tend to reduce friction.

(2) Applying the MARTIN framework

86 Mindful Engagement orients participants to the shared task and establishes respectful turn-taking. Assessment of Entrenchment then surfaces non-negotiables, identity stakes, outside audiences and time pressures, allowing a realistic scope for movement. Reframing Perspectives shifts the conversation from blame to concrete impacts linked to daily functioning and dignity. Transformative Dialogue uses short, structured turns that focus on what each party can live with in the near term. Interest-Based Solutions combine temporal zoning with practical mitigations framed as clear, observable routines and a simple written channel for raising concerns. Nurturing Commitment records who will do what, where and when, with observable thresholds so the settlement operates on a self-executing basis without external follow-up.

V. Conclusion

87 The MARTIN framework offers a culturally responsive structure for community mediation in Singapore. The cases show how structured rapport, careful de-entrenchment, and face-sensitive option building can

turn stalemates into workable routines. While only two illustrations are presented here, the same sequence travels to other recurrent disputes that centre on identity, dignity and daily routines.

88 Two limitations deserve emphasis. First, the framework has not yet been evaluated through a formal empirical pilot. Satisfaction, durability, and relational outcomes should be examined prospectively, preferably with comparison to conventional practice and clear process measures.²⁰ Second, cultural diversity within categories is significant. Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities are internally varied, and the techniques outlined here will benefit from calibration to age, class, language, and religiosity differences inside each group.²¹

89 Future work should test which of the elements improve practice in culturally mixed dyads the most, track costs and benefits in real cases, and examine how pre-filing and the CRU interact with mediation to produce better outcomes at lower social cost.

90 The framework is not a script. It is a scaffold that supports professional judgment. In some disputes, the right outcome is a modest, face-preserving arrangement rather than a sweeping deal. If the result is safer communication, reduced triggers, and clearer routines, that is progress worth valuing in dense, diverse neighbourhoods.

20 James A Wall & Timothy C Dunne, "Mediation Research: A Current Review" 28(2) *Negotiation Journal* 217; Robert A Baruch Bush & Joseph P Folger, *The Promise of Mediation: The Transformative Approach to Conflict* (John Wiley & Sons, Revised Edition, 2004); Timothy Hedeem, "The Evolution and Evaluation of Community Mediation: Limited Research Suggests Unlimited Progress" (2004) 22(1-2) *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 101.

21 Angela K-Y Leung & Dov Cohen, "Within- And Between-Culture Variation: Individual Differences and the Cultural Logics of Honor, Face, and Dignity Cultures" (2011) 100(3) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 507.