

A Framework for Easy Contextualization and Understanding of Conflict, Violence, and Peace

Teeko T. Yorlay

Political Affairs, Civil Affairs, Public Administration and Local Government Specialist, New York, USA

Email: tyorlay@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This paper discusses conflict as representing a clash of interests that needs to be resolved to avoid belligerent behavior and lay the foundation for the absence of aggression. Unresolved conflicts lay the foundation stone for tension and violence. Hence, it becomes a preoccupation, necessity, and imperative at once to work to resolve conflict, avoid violence, and guarantee peace. The concepts of conflict, violence, and peace cannot be better understood and appreciated when they are addressed and discussed in isolation. Hence, they have been described, analyzed, and presented in this article in a way that drives the concepts smoothly in relation to their meaningfulness in the stabilization of any society. This paper does not seek to give any reader the physical meanings of the concepts but aims to present meanings, interpretations, and analyses that make the concepts very visible to both the mental and physical eyes and feelings of any human.

Keywords

Conflict, Violence, Peace, Society

1. Introduction

Conflict, violence, and peace are three realities and concepts that must be discussed, interpreted, understood, and appreciated by giving them living meanings. By living meanings, I mean interpretations that make them very visible to the mental and physical eyes and feelings of human beings. Whether we like it or not, conflict, violence, and peace live with us and appear inseparable from human's existence. Conflict represents a clash of human needs and rights and efforts by some people to meet their needs and rights to the detriment of others. When those acts of meeting one's needs do not recognize, respect, and give room to meeting other's needs, conflict gets invited immediately, and it shows up instantly. When those

conflictual issues are not resolved, and people feel degraded, ignored, or humiliated in the process, they become defensive, and in some instances, put up aggressive attitudes and behavior that become known as violence. Unresolved conflicts sometimes beget violence, and resolved conflicts beget the opposite of violence, which is peace. The maintenance of peace and tranquillity requires the absence of conflict and violence.

Simply put, peace is the absence of conflict and violence. No work in conflict transformation and peacebuilding can be successfully understood without first clearly understanding these concepts. A clearer understanding accrued from them helps one to reduce, resolve and transform conflict to ensure peace. This paper has come to shed the necessary light on what conflict, violence, and peace are.

Peacebuilding and conflict transformation efforts can be well-targeted and properly positioned to achieve their desired impact when conflict, violence, and peace are well-understood and internalized.

2. Conflict Defined

Conflict has been declared as “a natural part of all relationships” (Schirch, 2008: p. 22). It is described as a perception of or existence of the mismatch of goals between two or more persons, groups or parties (Fisher et al., 2000: p. 4; Ramsbotham et al., 2011: p. 30). It often comes as a contest or struggles between or among people relative to their beliefs, objectives, thinking, needs, or principles (Pia & Diez, 2007: p. 2). It is a reflection of the irreconcilability of people’s positions on issues (Diez et al., 2006: p. 565). Conflict is even mostly present in peaceful environments and is, however, restricted to isolated cases that are not very important to claim society’s attention; and it can be handled using rules governing the society or is handled creatively, so that it leads to the generation of socio-political establishments via nonviolent change (Pia & Diez, 2007: p. 2). When people feel or believe that their needs are being inhibited or threatened by others because those obstructing the meeting of their needs want to satisfy their needs, then conflict occurs; and it can, however, be constructive when avenues are found or used to ensure that the needs of all those that are involved are satisfied (Schirch, 2008: p. 22). One realizes then that every society contains and lives with conflict in one of its forms: covert or overt. Whether latent or manifest, conflict represents worrying elements in any relationship and requires attention and solution to guarantee peaceful coexistence. That is why if not even fully solved, efforts have got to be continually applied to minimize its effects on any human society.

2.1. Types of Conflicts

In every society, there are four situations associated with conflicts that are present: the situation of no conflict, the situation of latent conflict, the situation of open conflict, and the situation of surface conflict (Fisher et al., 2000: p. 6).

The situation of no conflict reflects a peaceful environment and group of people that must integrate conflicts of behavior and objectives and deal with them creatively to eschew violence. In the situation of latent conflict, the conflict exists subterraneanly or below the surface or is not in the open and can be innovatively and effectively addressed to avoid it from becoming an open one. Open conflict is a deep-rooted and very noticeable conflict that bursts into the open and requires needed interventions to have it resolved by addressing two things: the root causes and the observable effects. When a conflict looks shallow with no deep roots and is just about a misunderstanding that can quickly be resolved by way of improvement in communication, then it is a surface conflict. Conflict hurts and consciously or unconsciously destabilizes people, relationships, and societies when they are not acknowledged and addressed. Fisher et al. (2000: p. 6) present three situations in which conflicts when not resolved and addressed can turn or become violent: inadequacy of means for the exchange of ideas and disagreement; when deep grievances and opposing voices cannot be heard and issues addressed; and when the wider society or community is plunged into that state of fright, discrimination and instability.

Additionally, Singer (1996: pp. 43-47) advances what is called conflict typology that deals with conflicts based on the conflicting parties' political status and has classified conflicts as 1) interstate conflict that involves conflict between two or more countries, 2) extra-systemic conflicts that are chiefly colonial wars, 3) non-interstate conflict that is about civil conflicts in which an insurgency group is one of the parties within established territorial limits of a country.

2.2. The Stages of Conflict

One cannot clearly understand a conflict in its entirety without necessarily understanding that it is something that exists and operates in stages in the first place. Understanding the stages of conflict helps one to know at what level the conflict is to be able to determine which intervention is necessary to arrest or solve it. Fisher et al. (2000: p. 19) have identified five stages of conflicts: pre-conflict, confrontation, crisis, outcome, and post-conflict. These stages are about and involve the activities associated with the conflict, the intensity of the conflict and tension embedded in the conflict, and the violence associated with it:

1) **Pre-conflict** is the stage of a conflict where an incompatibility occurs or starts between two or more parties, and has the tendency to turn into a full-blown conflict. At this point, the conflict is in its latent form or exists subterraneanly, and there exists a tension between the conflicting parties who pursue the path of avoiding each other.

2) The **confrontation stage** of conflict is when low-level brutality or cruelty becomes evident. At this point, the conflicting parties or both sides in the conflict work to mobilize resources and support in preparation for a full-blown conflict, with occasional violence or fighting taking place between the parties. Tense relationships between parties exist, while the parties look up to intensify confron-

tation and violence.

3) At the **crisis stage**, the conflict is at its peak, with more tension and violence that are not easily controllable. There exist human and material casualties on all sides of the conflict as the fighting elasticizes and communication on both sides is non-existent with widespread accusations and counteraccusations.

4) The **outcome** is usually the result of the conflict that comes in the form of a party defeating or giving in to the other, conflicting parties agreeing to negotiate, or an imposition of a settlement by a third party with the sole intent of reducing violence. However, conflict is not entirely settled. At this stage, confrontation and violence can take a downward spiral and substantially reduce, thereby, creating much-needed room for a possible peaceful settlement.

5) The **post-conflict stage** is the point at which an end is found to the conflict: the conflict is resolved; violence, tension, and violent confrontation are no more; and the normal relationship between parties is restored. It is at this point or stage that efforts have got to be applied to address the root causes of the conflict to avoid a relapse of the conflict.

Having an appropriate knowledge of the level at which a conflict is helps in planning for its proper resolution. Efforts and energies that need to be applied at the pre-conflict stage cannot necessarily be the same as those needed at the crisis and post-conflict stages. The tactics and strategies that are needed to arrest or resolve any conflict at each stage differ too.

3. Violence

Violence is any activity, approach, arrangement, system, or difference of opinion that originates or causes environmental, bodily, mental, or social destruction that prevents anybody from the attainment of his or her full human potentials (Fisher et al., 2000: p. 4). Schirch (2008: p. 22) feels that “violence is an attempt to do justice or undo justice”. It occurs when individuals feel little compassion for others and are incapable of using peaceful methods to meet their needs or when conflicts are addressed in manners that do away with or injure relationships by unsatisfying and rejecting the human needs of others. For any behavior to be construed as violent, it must contain the following intrinsic features: harmfulness, intentionality, unnecessariness and undesirability, and it must not include accidents and self-defense but incorporates, among other things, child abuse, murder, and sexual offenses (Hamby, 2017: p. 167). Hamby holds onto the view that when violence is best described, it can be very helpful in tracing or pinpointing the causes and effects and creates room to find solutions to its effects and directs how prevention mechanisms can be evolved to bring it to an end. It is against this backdrop that it has become obviously reasonable to define and know what violence itself is and represents. American Psychological Association (n.d.) has declared that:

Violence is an extreme form of aggression, such as assault, rape, or murder. Violence has many causes, including frustration, exposure to violent media, vi-

olence in the home or neighborhood and a tendency to see other people's actions as hostile even when they're not.

Violence is represented by and seen in any act of aggression, force, or terrorization that leaves marks on the body and mind of any person or a people, and has three types: direct, structural, and cultural. The foundation of violence can be easily traceable to the “dominate-or-be-dominated worldview” (Schirch, 2008: p. 16). Violence is usually carried out by a particular person or persons whose intent remains to undermine and debilitate the other person.

4. The Classifications or Categories of Violence

4.1. Direct Violence

Direct violence is a purposefully visible act of aggression (Cravo, 2017: p. 46). It is characterized by force, terrorization, and damaging attacks and can only be avoided and or ended by changing and eliminating conflictual behavior (Ramsbotham et al., 2011: p. 11). Direct violence, at times, comes about when a person or a group of people feels belittled, degraded, and chooses to oppose and reject acts of injustice being meted out against them and have eventually elected to fight and even meet their demises in the process of trying to defend their cultural, physical and societal identities.

4.2. Structural Violence

Structural violence covers all those economic, political, and social structures of any conflict situation that sanction and perpetuate supremacy, dependence, and unequal power (Wani et al., 2013: p. 35). It is a form of violence that is hidden and indirect and is a derivative of societal structures that facilitate political repression and economic exploitation (Cravo, 2017: p. 46). It represents what Ramsbotham et al. (2011: p. 11) describe as “[a] conflict structure without conflictual attitudes or behavior”. Structural violence can be ended by eliminating structural contradictions represented by political repressions, deprivation, economic exploitations, and justice in any society (Ramsbotham et al., 2011: p. 11).

When structures are immersed, enveloped, or wrapped into violence, they resolutely contaminate an entire society and its ways of life. It eventually leads to inequality in a meeting of human needs and rights, and it results ultimately in secondary violence that manifests itself in the forms of “civil wars, crimes, domestic violence, substance abuse, and suicide” (Schirch, 2008: p. 23). Structural violence occurs when disabilities, inequalities, and deaths take place as a result of the failure of systems, institutions, and policies to meet the human needs and rights of all members of the society, but unfortunately meet the needs and rights of some members of the society.

4.3. Cultural Violence

Associated with direct and structural violence is cultural violence that is reflec-

tive of arrangements of norms and fundamental behavior that make one see and accept political repression and economic exploitation as natural and normal and hard to remove from society (Cravo, 2017: p. 46). Cultural violence represents those features of culture that are reflective of the arts, ideological and religious alignments, the language one speaks, and other things that represent a way of life that can be used to give legitimacy to direct and structural violence (Galtung, 1990: p. 291). It has been used over time to provide some sense of correctness or rightness to the occurrences of direct and structural violence as it is anchored on ways of life and beliefs of people who feel even justified at participating in and meting out violence. It manifests itself in a cultural and societal stamp of rightness to political, economic, and social domination of and discrimination against a group of people (Wani et al., 2013: p. 35). Cultural violence can be ended by the change of attitude or the way of life to that which gives a sense of disapproval and wrongness to economic exploitation, dispossession, political repression and injustice in a given community, nation or state.

5. Peace Defined

Peace has been defined by Galtung (2018: p. 35) as “the absence of violence”. It is about creating no distance between the potential and actual needs and rights of a people. The absence of a clash between people’s interests suggests peace and its accompanying peaceful environment. Ramsbotham et al. (2011: p. 12) describe peace as “an interweaving of relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions that value diversity and foster the full development of human potential”. They argue that it is a multifaceted and endless process to transform violence that is comparable to healthiness whose absence in any person marks the stage of its recognition. Fernández-Dols et al. (2004: p. 119) have argued that “peace revolves around the values of equality (e.g. with respect to access to information, with respect to authorities, with respect to relationships between women and men), fraternity (e.g. tolerance, solidarity), and liberty (e.g. cooperation and democracy)”. For peace to exist and be sustained, there has to exist a culture of peace, and for the culture of peace to exist, there has to be a culture of the nonexistence of hostility.

Looking at things from a very holistic perspective, peace, therefore, means the nonexistence of physical or mental aggression and harassment. It is about improved interaction or relationship between and or among people void of clash of interests. It embodies tolerance, cooperation, and respect for each other’s views, feelings, needs, and rights. The issues of political repression, economic exploitation, and deprivation, lack of social justice, marginalization, hunger, poverty, and underdevelopment are unfriendly and antithetical to peace and the peacefulness of any person and society. On the one hand, it is their absence, among other things, that allows peace to exist and be enjoyed, and it is their presence, on the other hand, that makes one to miss and appreciate peace dearly and concomitantly.

5.1. The Classification or Categorization of Peace

Peace, like anything, has types that must be understood and views about what they mean and offer crystalized. It is in this light that it becomes more than a compelling necessity for the types or kinds of peace to be identified and discussed to nail or hammer home clearly and neatly what peace is in all its forms. Peace can, therefore, be categorized as follows:

1) **Negative peace or cold peace** is the nonexistence of confrontation or the lack of “an armed form of violence between political units” even though there exists beyond the surface tension in the society (Fernández-Dols et al., 2004: p. 120; Ramsbotham et al., 2011: p. 12). This peace exists in the society but with fear and unresolved issues existing too. This kind of peace requires some work to turn it into a positive one by doing away with the negative aspect(s).

2) **Positive peace or warm peace** is existent when universal human rights are respected, when the economic well-being of the people is prioritized, ecological concerns and environments are addressed and protected respectively, and when other core values of the people are placed on the pedestal of increased relevance (Ramsbotham et al., 2011: 12). Peace is positive when reconciliation has taken place, and the conflict is creatively transformed and leads to improved relationships (Noll, n.d.).

3) **Direct peace**, drawing from what the meaning and intent of direct violence is, must be known to be the absence of force, terrorization, and damaging attacks as a result of a change and elimination of conflictual behaviour.

4) **Structural peace**, drawing from what the meaning and intent of structural violence is, covers the absence of all those economic, political, and social structures that sanction, give legitimacy to and perpetuate political repression, economic exploitation, deprivation, supremacy, dependence, unequal power and lack of social justice.

5) **Cultural peace** represents those features of culture or ways of life that can be used to give legitimacy to direct and structural peace (Galtung, 1990: p. 291).

6) **Justpeace** is a concept that emphasizes that one achieves injustice as an end result when justice is pursued aggressively and maintains that the sustainability of peace is not likely to exist and be guaranteed without justice (Schirch, 2008: pp. 16-17).

7) **Liberal peace** is known to be the promotion of the Western way of life, identity, and standards over the way of life, identity, and standards of others (Lidén, 2011: p. 57) and is an offshoot of liberal peacebuilding that imposes a top-bottom model of peacebuilding that assumes that solution to national problems or conflict has to be carved outside and brought in as a ready-made one. This type of peace gives decreased relevance and limited recognition to the local capacity or capacities for peace.

8) **Hybrid peace** is about the promotion of internal and external values by internal and external actors to facilitate and ensure the nonexistence of hostility

and promote peaceful co-existence (Cravo, 2017: p. 46).

5.2. The Efforts at Restoring Peace When Absent

Like mentioned before, peace can only be appreciated and missed when absent. It is its absence that leads to the need to have it restored. Its restoration is not magical. It requires concerted efforts. Those efforts come about through initiatives aimed at peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding, which according to Cravo (2017: p. 46), are described by the founder of Peace Studies Johan Galtung as the “[t]hree Approaches to peace”. Peace cannot maintain, destroy, or restore itself. It is destroyed by people, and so it is people’s efforts that must bring peace back into existence when it is destroyed. That is why peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding are human efforts aimed purposely at the restoration and maintenance of peace.

5.2.1. Peacekeeping

Peacekeeping is about actions taken purposefully to inhibit and bring to a standstill the continuation of hostility, aggression, or armed conflict (Fetherston, 1994: p. 125 citing Coate & Puchala, 1990). It seeks to assist and take steps to make sure that conflicting parties cease fire and stop fighting, even though they might not necessarily trust each other. It is done with the help of an intervening third party that must extract assurances from the conflicting parties not to break the rules of the ceasefire and disengagement of continuous belligerent activities (Holst, 1991: p. 111). No other action can be taken to foster peace without first calming down the antagonistic forces and their operations to pave the way for further necessary interventions in the peace continuum. That is why peacekeeping must precede peacemaking and peacebuilding activities in any conflictual situation.

5.2.2. Peacemaking

After assurances have been extracted and actions manifest that hostilities have ceased with a visible change in conflictual behavior, the approach to peace graduates to peacemaking. United Nations Peacekeeping (2023: para. 3, line 1) considers peacemaking as “measures to address conflicts in progress and usually involves diplomatic action to bring hostile parties to a negotiated agreement”. For peace to be successfully made, there has to be the utilization of supportive and constructive avenues to resolve social conflict with the sole purpose of repairing broken relationship or relationships. Ensuring that broken relationships are repaired is the core focus of peacemaking intervention. It is not merely about turning one’s attention away from injustice or abuse and submissively stomach-ing mistreatment.

5.2.3. Peacebuilding

Rosbe (2018: p. 1) views peacebuilding as an assortment of activities that includes formal or informal players that work “to prevent, contain or end violent conflicts, and seek to establish conditions in which political, social, economic and identity-based conflicts are less likely to result in violence and more likely to pro-

duce constructive change”. It requires addressing the root or underlying causes of a conflict so that when they are satisfactorily dealt with, there can be a guarantee that there would not be a relapse of the conflict. It is at this stage that peacebuilding work must seek to engender development by way of interventions that address the socio-economic development as well as socio-political issues or concerns that, in the first place, laid the groundwork for the conflict. It is at this point that development and peacebuilding interconnect and intertwine. It means that development work during and after conflict must seek to promote peace and peacebuilding during and after conflict must seek to encourage development.

6. Conclusion

Efforts have been applied to define peace as the nonexistence of aggressive, belligerent behavior, discrimination, and subjugation (Rosbe, 2018: p. 1). It is when those activities and/or elements that do not need to exist for peace to be, show up in a society that conflict emerges because there are existent clashes of interests. When said clashes of interests are not addressed, they then graduate into aggressive, belligerent behaviors, otherwise known as violence. Conflict lives with us and must be addressed continuously to keep society peaceful and stable. Violence visits us when conflict is not managed well or addressed adequately. Peace escapes us when poorly managed and unaddressed conflict turns into violence. Peace and violence are opposite concepts that make the law of impenetrability a reality. The two of them cannot exist at the same time in the same place. As one emerges, the other dissipates. Of course, society always needs the presence of one: peace, and the absence of one: violence. It is to this end that the need for peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding must be given increased attention and relevance to contribute to the continuous tranquillity and stability of society.

The mere absence of violence or fear of violence—known as negative peace—does not necessarily equate to peace that any society wants, needs and appreciates. Instead, peace is a multidimensional concept encompassing the attitudes, institutions, and structures that encourage and sustain peaceful societies. Positive peace is determined not only by the absence of violence, but also by a mass of other necessary social characteristics, including stronger economic outcomes, measures of well-being, levels of inclusivity, and environmental performance. Positive peace creates an environment wherein individuals can thrive, both as individuals and as members of a wider community or society. Conflict resolution and peacebuilding rely on tools like dialogue, mediation, and other forms of nonviolent conflict resolution as indispensable tools to resolve and prevent conflict in all its manifestations to ensure that a negative peace is transformed into a positive one.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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