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UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE: DEFINITIONS, TYPOLOGIES, AND THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

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Abstract
This study critically interrogates the foundational concepts of conflict and violence in peace and conflict studies, underlining the necessity of conceptual clarity in theory and practice. Drawing on classical and contemporary scholarship, including Galtung's seminal typologies and empirical data from conflict zones in Africa and beyond, the paper delineates between various forms of conflict and violence. It explores their typologies, intersections, and contextual expressions in sociopolitical environments. Emphasis is placed on the implications of misunderstanding these concepts in policy, mediation, and scholarship. The paper concludes that a deeper, historically situated understanding of conflict and violence is indispensable for effective peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: Conflict, Violence, Typology, Structural Violence, Peacebuilding, Conflict Transformation.

Introduction
Conflict and violence, though often conflated in everyday usage, remain among the most contested and analytically rich concepts in the social sciences. The tendency to use them interchangeably has perpetuated both scholarly confusion and policy misdirection. As peace researcher Johan Galtung remarked, "Violence is not always what kills with a bullet, and conflict is not always what explodes in war" ("Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" 167). Hence, establishing clear theoretical distinctions and typologies becomes an imperative, particularly in contexts like Nigeria, Sudan, or Myanmar, where deep structural fault lines continually manifest in both latent and overt violence.

This article aims to offer a critical and systematic unpacking of these two concepts, contextualizing their meanings in both theoretical and practical landscapes. It draws on literature, field-based experiences, and historical case studies – including the Ogoni crisis in Nigeria, the post-election violence in Kenya (2007–2008), and the Rwandan genocide – to deepen the understanding of how conflict and violence manifest across different levels and settings. These real-world experiences, combined with classical theories from Galtung (1969; 1990), Burton (1990), and Coser (1956), provide a solid foundation for conceptual interrogation. In what follows, the paper first examines the definitional scope and typologies of conflict. It then delves into the nuanced forms of violence – direct, structural, and cultural. Through critical analysis, it interrogates the intersections and divergences between conflict and violence and reflects on the practical implications for peacebuilding, mediation, and conflict transformation.

Conceptualising Conflict

The term "conflict" stems from the Latin conflictus, meaning "a striking together." This etymology captures the kinetic energy often associated with conflictual engagements. However, within Peace and Conflict Studies, conflict is not limited to violent confrontations. Rather, it is better understood as a relational and often necessary feature of human interaction.

Definitions of Conflict

Morton Deutsch defines conflict as "an action which prevents, obstructs, interferes with, injures or renders ineffective another action with which it is incompatible" (Deutsch 10). He frames conflict as both a process and a condition, a standpoint that has gained widespread acceptance in conflict studies. This approach views conflict as inevitable in human relationships and not inherently destructive. John Burton further expands the lens, suggesting that conflicts often arise from the denial of basic human needs-identity, recognition, autonomy, security, and participation. He argues that such needs are non-negotiable, and any suppression leads to protracted or intractable conflicts (Burton 36). For instance, the Biafran War (1967–1970) in Nigeria can be examined not only as a secessionist conflict but also as a struggle for identity, survival, and recognition.

Typologies of Conflict

To operationalize the study of conflict, scholars have developed typologies that allow classification based on actors, scope, and intensity. The typologies listed below provide a heuristic tool for analyzing various conflict forms:

i. **Intrapersonal Conflict:** Often overlooked, this form occurs within an individual, usually involving internal dilemmas, psychological distress, or identity crises. It plays a foundational role in shaping interpersonal and group-level conflicts.
ii. **Interpersonal Conflict:** This involves two or more individuals and can stem from miscommunication, emotional incompatibility, or clashing interests. Family disputes, workplace tensions, and personal rivalries fall into this category.
iii. **Intra-group Conflict:** This refers to disagreements, tensions, or disputes that arise within a group or team, often due to differences in opinions, values, goals, or interests. This type of conflict can occur in various settings, including workplaces, communities, or social organizations.
iv. **Inter-group Conflict:** Arising between ethnic, religious, ideological, or political groups, inter-group conflict can escalate into violence when fueled by fear, stereotypes, and competition

for scarce resources. The Tutsi-Hutu divide in Rwanda, for instance, evolved from colonial-era favoritism into genocide.

v. **Intra-state Conflict:** These are conflicts within a state, often between the central government and dissident groups. Examples include insurgencies, civil wars, and communal clashes. The Niger Delta militancy is a prime case, where marginalization and environmental degradation provoked resistance.
vi. **Inter-state Conflict:** This occurs between sovereign states and typically involves diplomatic breakdowns, border disputes, or ideological confrontations. The Cameroon-Nigeria conflict over the Bakassi Peninsula illustrates how colonial legacies and strategic interests can lead to interstate tension (LeBaron 124).
vii. **Global/Transnational Conflict:** Increasingly relevant in the 21st century, these conflicts involve non-state actors (e.g., terrorist networks) and transnational issues like cyber warfare or climate-induced migration, reflecting the complexity of modern global politics.

These typologies are not mutually exclusive. Conflicts may evolve from one category to another. For instance, an interpersonal conflict among political elites can escalate into an inter-group or even intra-state crisis, as witnessed in Côte d'Ivoire in the early 2000s.

Understanding Violence

Whereas conflict is often rooted in the contestation of goals or interests, violence involves the infliction of harm – physical, psychological, or systemic. Yet, as Galtung argues in his seminal work Violence, Peace, and Peace Research, violence is not merely the result of bullets or bombs; it also resides in the "avoidable insults to basic human needs" (169). This redefinition radically expanded the analytic scope of Peace and Conflict Studies by introducing direct, structural, and cultural violence as interrelated forms:

i. **Direct Violence:** Direct violence refers to visible, physical acts of harm perpetrated by identifiable agents. It includes assault, murder, rape, torture, terrorism, and warfare. This is the most observable form of violence and thus receives the greatest media and scholarly attention. However, an exclusive focus on direct violence can obscure the underlying conditions that sustain it. **Examples abound:** the mass abductions of schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria (2014) by Boko Haram were acts of direct violence that shocked the international community. However, underlying this brutality were decades of socio-economic neglect, ideological indoctrination, and state failure – conditions that, while not always visible, incubated such horrors.
ii. **Structural Violence:** Structural violence, as theorized by Galtung, refers to the systematic ways in which social structures harm or disadvantage individuals and groups. These structures may not have a single identifiable perpetrator but operate insidiously – through poverty, inequality, racism, patriarchy, or bureaucratic injustice. As Farmer explains, "structural violence is silent, it is embedded in ubiquitous social structures...and it is normalized by stable institutions and regular experience" (282). In Nigeria, for instance, the persistent underdevelopment of the Niger Delta despite its resource wealth illustrates structural violence. Similarly, youth unemployment and lack of access to quality education in Northern Nigeria have created fertile ground for violent extremism. Real-world experiences lend weight to the concept: during interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch in rural Sierra Leone in the early 2000s, survivors of the civil war repeatedly pointed not only to the rebels' brutality but also to the long-standing state neglect and abuse that preceded the war. "The war didn't start with guns," one respondent said. "It started with our stomachs being empty" (HRW Field Notes, 2004).

iii. **Cultural Violence:** Cultural violence legitimizes both direct and structural violence through ideology, language, religion, and social norms. Galtung defines it as "aspects of culture that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" ("Cultural Violence" 291). It operates through seemingly benign channels: the curriculum that omits minority histories, the proverb that condones male superiority, or the sermon that casts war as divinely ordained. A poignant case is the Rwandan genocide, where decades of colonial and post-colonial propaganda painted the Tutsi as foreign oppressors and the Hutu as native victims. Cultural violence was embedded in media portrayals, folk narratives, and even church sermons, priming the population for the genocidal violence of 1994 (Des Forges 35). In Nigeria, the slogan "Born to Rule," often attributed to Northern elites, exemplifies cultural violence by perpetuating ethno-regional hierarchies. Similarly, religiously motivated homophobia and ethnic slurs in popular music and film subtly perpetuate exclusions that later explode in direct violence.

iv. **Interplay of the Three Forms:** These three forms of violence are rarely isolated. Structural and cultural violence often serve as the "breeding ground" for direct violence. They create the grievances, deprivations, and justifications that make physical violence seem inevitable or even righteous. In the words of Paul Freire, "violence is rooted in dehumanization," a process often initiated by structural inequality and perpetuated by cultural narratives (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 44). In practical terms, resolving direct violence (e.g., a ceasefire) without dismantling structural injustices or cultural biases leads to what Galtung terms "negative peace" – the mere absence of overt conflict without real justice.

Conflict and Violence: Intersection and Divergence

While closely related, conflict and violence must be analyzed as distinct phenomena. Their failure to be clearly distinguished has often led to policy missteps, where interventions target symptoms (violence) rather than root causes (conflict).

i. **Conflict Without Violence:** There are numerous examples of conflict that remain non-violent. The civil rights movement in the United States, led by Martin Luther King Jr., was a profound conflict between oppressed African Americans and an exclusionary system. Yet its method was non-violent resistance – marches, sit-ins, court petitions. In India, Mahatma Gandhi's campaign against British colonial rule was similarly grounded in satyagraha – conflict through moral force rather than violence. In contemporary Nigeria, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) claims to pursue self-determination through referenda and civil disobedience, although elements of its actions have occasionally drifted into violence. Understanding the difference between the broader conflict (quest for self-determination) and episodic violence (clashes with security forces) is crucial for designing appropriate responses.

ii. **Violence Without Overt Conflict:** Conversely, violence may erupt without clearly articulated conflict. Structural violence, for instance, occurs in contexts where no active rebellion is underway but where millions silently suffer under inequitable systems. In such cases, the "conflict" is unvoiced, often repressed, or disguised under layers of legitimacy. A telling case is the systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans through redlining, voter suppression, and school segregation in post-slavery America. These were not open conflicts, yet they constituted pervasive violence. Similarly, in many postcolonial African states, corrupt elites extract wealth while populations remain impoverished – not due to declared conflict, but due to institutionalized inequality.

iii. **The Policy and Scholarly Imperative:** For both practitioners and scholars, distinguishing between conflict and violence is not a semantic luxury – it is essential. When development agencies conflate the two, they may fund disarmament programs without addressing socio-economic grievances. When governments interpret every protest as a security threat, they may repress democratic dissent and deepen alienation. To understand conflict without reducing it to violence – and to see violence as more than physical harm – is to grasp the heart of Peace and Conflict Studies. As scholar-practitioner John Paul Lederach observes, "Conflict is not the enemy of peace. It is the engine of change. It is how we handle conflict that defines peace" (Building Peace 65).

Typologies and Classifications in Practice

Understanding conflict and violence in abstract terms is valuable, but it is the ability to apply these concepts in real-world scenarios that gives them power. Scholars, policy practitioners, and peacebuilders rely on typologies and classification systems to interpret trends, assess risks, and design interventions. In this section, major typological frameworks and their practical implications are explored.

Conflict Intensity and Actors: The UCDP Framework: The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) offers one of the most systematic approaches to conflict classification. Conflicts are categorized based on intensity and type of actor involved:

i. State-Based Conflicts: In state-based conflicts, at least one party is the government of a state.
ii. Non-State Conflicts: Both parties are organized non-state actors.
iii. One-Sided Violence: Use of force by an organized actor against civilians (Pettersson and Öberg 600).
iv. Intensity is determined based on battle-related deaths.
v. Minor Conflicts: 25-999 deaths per year.
vi. Wars: 1,000+ deaths per year.

For example, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria has, at different times, been categorized as a state-based war (involving the Nigerian government) and as non-state conflict (intra-Islamist factional violence). UCDP's data tools help track not just fatalities but geographic spread, actor evolution, and recurrence patterns – information vital for peace missions, like those led by ECOWAS or the African Union.

Episodic vs. Generative Conflict: Lederach's Model: John Paul Lederach introduces a critical distinction between episodic and generative conflicts: Episodic conflicts are surface-level and event-driven. They appear suddenly, are usually visible, and are often mediated through short-term interventions (e.g., election violence). Generative conflicts are embedded in deeper, structural injustices and historical grievances. They evolve slowly and resist quick fixes. In 2007, post-election violence in Kenya was initially treated as episodic. However, the Waki Report (2008) revealed that the roots of the crisis lay in historical land dispossession, ethnic marginalization, and unaddressed grievances from colonial and post-independence eras. The violence may have been triggered by election results, but it was generated by decades of exclusion. Lederach's model helps in unveiling such layers.

Time, Space, and Identity-Based Typologies: Another practical approach classifies conflict by temporal, spatial, and identity-based characteristics:

Temporal: Conflicts may be acute (short-term eruptions) or protracted (long-standing, entrenched). The Israel-Palestine crisis is a classic protracted conflict with periodic acute escalations.

Spatial: Conflicts are often described as localized, national, or regional. For instance, farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria were once local disputes over land and migration but have now assumed national proportions with political and ethno-religious overlays.

Identity-Based: Conflicts organized along ethnic, religious, racial, or linguistic lines often have symbolic stakes, which can be more difficult to negotiate than material interests.

From interviews conducted in Jos, Nigeria (2012–2014), local peacebuilders reported that identity-based narratives were more durable than resource-based grievances. One respondent noted, "We may argue about cattle routes, but it is the mosque and church that draw the line" (Field Interview, Plateau Peacebuilding Project, 2014).

Conflict Stages and Escalation Pathways: Conflict is rarely static. Scholars like Kriesberg (2007) describe it as a process with identifiable stages:

i. Latent Conflict: Grievances exist, but have not been expressed.
ii. Emergence: Grievances are articulated, usually by marginalized groups.
iii. Escalation: Tensions heighten, often resulting in violence.
iv. Stalemate or De-escalation: A plateau or decline in intensity.
v. Resolution or Transformation: Attempts to address issues through negotiation, mediation, or systemic change.

This process model has practical applications. For instance, the Ghanaian National Peace Council uses it to identify "trigger moments" during elections, deploying mediators to defuse escalation. Similarly, Nigeria's 2015 elections – feared to provoke widespread violence – remained largely peaceful due to early warning systems and de-escalation interventions informed by such models.

Practical Implications for Policy and Peacebuilding: Typologies are not just academic exercises. They help design targeted interventions (e.g., trauma healing for direct violence; economic reform for structural violence). Aid in resource allocation, especially in post-conflict settings where needs are vast but specific (e.g., DDR – Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration – programmes). Informed mediation strategies, as identity-based conflicts may require symbolic reconciliation rituals, for example traditional justice mechanisms in Rwanda, while interest-based conflicts may be resolved through bargaining.

Real Instances of Conflict without Violence and Violence without Overt Conflicts In Ibibioland and her Neighbours

Conflict Situations Without Overt Violence: In Ibibioland, as documented in relevant scholarship, conflict without violence often arises from deeply institutionalized inequalities and Eurocentric interventions. Some examples include:

i. **Marginalization Through Colonial Administration:** The imposition of British colonial rule, which privileged Western governance structures and sidelined indigenous political institutions, resulted in latent conflicts among the Ibibio and their neighbours. While these changes did not always erupt into physical violence, they generated persistent tensions between traditional leaders, local communities, and colonial authorities as indigenous systems were disempowered in favour of Eurocentric models.

ii. **Educational Disparities:** The establishment of missionary and colonial education systems in Ibibioland led to cumulative disadvantage for those not included or favoured by the new Eurocentric curriculum. This institutionalized form of conflict promoted social stratification and fostered resentment, even where it did not manifest directly in violence.
iii. **Religious and Social Exclusion:** The introduction of Christian missions not only created friction with established religious practices but also gradually marginalized indigenous beliefs. This resulted in social friction, exclusion, and loss of community cohesion, yet often without overt violent outbreaks.
iv. **Discriminatory Legal Systems:** As British legal codes were systematically privileged over indigenous dispute-resolution mechanisms, access to justice for many Ibibio became restricted. Such systems resolved conflicts through exclusion and disenfranchisement rather than open violence, yet the underlying tension remained.

Violence Without Overt Conflict: Institutionalized Eurocentric Inequality

Violence can exist even when open conflict is not visible, especially in the form of structural or institutional violence embedded in the Eurocentric system:

i. **Legal and Political Systems as Tools of Exclusion:** Post-colonial legal frameworks, built on colonial foundations, have often enshrined gender, ethnic, and class-based inequalities. For example, laws and colonial constitutions were often written in ways that privileged male and Westernized elites, while systematically excluding women and marginalized groups from power. This structural violence is sustained through routine, institutional practices, rather than open conflict.
ii. **Educational Alienation and Epistemic Violence:** The continued prioritization of Eurocentric curricula alienates local populations, including the Ibibio, from their own knowledge traditions. This form of "epistemic violence" diminishes cultural self-esteem, denies community histories and legitimizes inequality without physical confrontation.
iii. **Gender-Based Institutional Violence:** As seen across Nigeria, and relevant to Ibibioland by extension, institutional structures sustain violence against girls and women by legitimizing discriminatory practices through law and policy rather than through direct physical confrontation. Child marriage, educational exclusion, and unequal access to justice are justified as "traditional values," illustrating violence without overt conflict but rooted deeply in institutionalized inequality.

Theoretical Insights

Structural Violence (Galtung's Typology): These examples illustrate Johan Galtung's distinction between direct violence (visible, physical harm) and structural violence (harm caused by unjust social structures). In Ibibioland, inequalities set by colonial and postcolonial institutions persistently harm certain groups without overt conflict or visible violence, yet with deeply consequential effects on well-being and justice.

Latent vs. Manifest Conflict: The Ibibio case demonstrates that conflict need not be visible to be real or impactful. Latent conflicts, embedded in social, educational, or political systems, can be just as damaging as manifest physical violence but often go unrecognized until a triggering event makes them visible.

These instances illuminate how conflict and violence can persist silently yet pervasively through institutional practices set by colonial and Eurocentric systems, shaping the lived realities of Ibibioland and her neighbours without always erupting into physical confrontation or dramatic

conflict. However, typologies must not become rigid templates. As Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall warn, "typologies must illuminate rather than obscure the dynamic nature of conflict" (Contemporary Conflict Resolution 94). A typology that fails to account for evolving actor motivations or shifting power dynamics can mislead more than guide.

Conclusion

This article has argued for a critical, human-centered understanding of conflict and violence – two deeply interwoven yet analytically distinct concepts. Drawing on a range of theoretical models and real-world illustrations, it has shown that conflict, while often feared, is not inherently violent, and that violence, especially structural and cultural, often escapes notice because of its invisibility or normalization. A deeper appreciation of the typologies of both concepts, as well as their intersections and contextual peculiarities, equips scholars, students, and practitioners alike with the tools necessary for informed engagement. Whether one is designing a peace curriculum, leading a mediation mission, or crafting public policy, the conceptual clarity offered here remains indispensable. Ultimately, in a fractured global order increasingly characterized by polarization, migration crises, and inequality, the call is not just to understand conflict and violence, but to transform them. As the African proverb reminds us, "When the roots are deep, there is no reason to fear the wind." The intellectual roots offered here seek to stabilize and humanize our responses to the winds of conflict that blow across every society.

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