# THE SUBJECTIVE FACTORS IMPACT ON CONFLICT DYNAMICS

**Aleksandar Pavleski**[73]

Faculty of Philosophy – Skopje, Institute for Security, Defence and Peace

**Abstract:** Regardless of the level at which they occur, ie. from the lowest individual or local, up to the highest or global one, conflicts usually attract the most attention, when aggression and violence become a part of the conflict behavior. At the same time, in such situations the focus of all involved actors (direct and indirect) in the conflict is usually placed on the objective causes and aspects that have initiated the violence occurrence or escalation. It practically means that the importance of subjective aspects and factors for such conflict situations, is often put on the margins in conflict management approaches. Starting from the thesis that such aspects, above all: perceptions, stereotypes and the interpretation of past experience, also have a significant impact on the conflict constellation and structure, the paper analyzes their mutual relationship more specifically. Actually, behind the objective and visible values and assumptions about a concrete conflict, there are almost always in the background, other, deeper values and assumptions (perceptions, stereotypes, prejudices) that further complicate its nature and structure. Hence, the paper analyzes the essential characteristics of these aspects, especially through the prism of their impact on the conflict dynamics expansion and complication. The purpose of such an analysis is to advance the awareness about the meaning and impact of subjective aspects on the conflict, as well as the awareness about the need for apply a broader and multidisciplinary approaches in dealing with conflicts.

**Keywords:** conflict, perceptions, stereotypes, past experience, resolution.

## Introduction

From a historical point of view, there is no doubt that conflicts present an integral part of relations both, between states, and between different groups within the states themselves. Regarding the reasons for their occurrence, the theory points out that conflicts between different groups (national, ethnic, religious, etc.), are mostly rooted in the political, historical, economic and even psychological aspirations of the groups. Hence, researching the nature of such aspirations, as well as the reasons and circumstances for their occurrence, may have a significant role in detecting the most acceptable strategies for conflict managing, transforming and resolving. Moreover, such an approach is especially needed in situations in which the conflicting parties perceive themselves as ultimate or mortal enemies with whom mutual understanding, compromise and real resolution of misunderstandings or the reasons that initiated the conflict, cannot be achieved. In fact, conflicts within violence is present, in which the developed hatred towards the opposite party initiates violent acts, are the most difficult to solve and resolve, for the reason that the very existence of the opposite party, usually begins to be perceived as a serious problem, which develops the thesis: either we,

---

[73] Contact address: pavleski@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

or them! Such situation is associated with the Armageddon syndrome, which represents an irreconcilable struggle, victory for either one or the other.

Regarding to such situations, the dilemma inevitably arises, as to whether the only possible solution must necessarily be connected to the indicated thesis, or whether it can and should be connected to other aspects and dynamics primarily aimed at violence de-escalation, and then, towards peaceful management of the causes of the conflict.

According to conflict management theory, efforts to establish an end to violence, should always be present and take precedence over violence itself. Perhaps the best confirmation about the acceptability of such understanding, comes from the fact that almost all previous conflicts (regardless of whether they are interstate or internal conflicts), ultimately end with a "peace" agreement between the conflicting parties. Hence, the faster the conflicting parties overcome the challenge of using violence, the grater possibility about more effective conflict resolution opens up.

Actually, through the such approach implementation, firstly, all measurable and visible (objective) negative conflict consequences would be limited, such as: victims, displaced persons, refugees, material losses, destroyed infrastructure, etc., and secondly, it would also be "easily" to manage the challenges associated with the so-called, immeasurable and invisible (subjective) negative consequences, such as: mutual hatred, desire for revenge, division, mistrust, lack of communication, negative perceptions and stereotypes, etc.. However, despite the fact that the indicated approach represents an adequate alternative to violence, the previous experience of the conflict management process, shows that it is not at all simple and easily applicable and that it faces numerous challenges, among which, especially the challenge about the necessity of changing the way of thinking among the conflicting parties. In fact, the longer the violence will be on the scene, the more negative perceptions, stereotypes and experience will be present, especially as factors that, on the one hand, will contribute to conflict escalation and growth in one hand, and it will also harm the implementation of the previously indicated necessity about the changing the way of thinking, on other hand.

## The impact of perceptions

A different perception or discrepancy between reality and what appears to be real to the conflicting parties, greatly contributes to the instigation, as well as to the conflict escalation. Most often, the reason for such a discrepancy is due to the fact that the very perception of objects and events is a complex and extremely subjective process.

Namely, within the framework of theoretical approaches to the psychological aspects of conflicts, there is the image that two individuals can perceive two different things even when both witnessed the same event or saw the same object. Such different perceptions of the same event or object ,are largely determined by the spectrum and nature of the information available to both parties. So, everything that a person perceives passes through the filter of his mental set, which is formed by his expectations, by the concrete situation, by adopted values, past experience, as well as by cultural factors (Gocevski, Ortakovski, Georgieva, 1999). Hence, it follows that in every situation that mental set participates, which models everything that a person will see, hear and experience. That is why it is common for the conflicting parties to experience the behavior in a different way and to assign a different meaning to it. At the same time, from the point of view of the strategies for solving and resolving conflicts,

the situations in which the behavior on one side is perceived as friendly, and on the other side as an intention to dominate, are particularly complex.

From the perspective of the conflict basic elements (conflict state/situation, conflict attitudes and conflict behavior), perceptions due to their subjective selectivity, especially complicate the first element, ie. the conflict situation, which means that people or conflicting parties tend to notice only what they want to notice, emphasizing only the facts that confirm their point of view and understanding, not taking into account or misinterpreting the facts (on the opposite side) that do not are consistent with theirs.

So, people and conflicting parties, have a mental predisposition to select and remember generally negative information about their opponents. This tendency is fatal because it makes images of the enemy self-confirming and resistant to change. In fact, perceiving the situation through the lens of a negative image of the enemy, one approaches the selective selection and memory of negative information that not only fits into that image, but also reinforces it. At the same time, very little attention is usually paid to the useful steps or actions of the enemy, which further complicates the possibility of perceiving it from a positive context. The end result of such situation is the creation of the so-called a closed mind that resists challenges to the rigid stereotypes held by the conflicting parties (Мурџева-Шкариќ, 1998).

So what would be the possible exit way from such situation in terms of conflict settlement and resolution strategies?

Actually, in such a situation, the conflicting parties in order to be able to deal with it, must manifest readiness and sensitivity to observe and understand the situation itself from the perspective of the opposite side and, what is even more significant, to accept the point of view of the other side as equally justified. Still, bearing in mind that it is not a simple process, the question inevitably arises of how the indicated transformation can be applied by the conflicting parties themselves? According to the theory of conflict management, the answer to such question should be sought in external intervention, ie. mediation.

Namely, the approximation of the attitudes and perceptions of the conflicting parties, through the mediation of a third party, involves the use of a third party that is not directly involved in the conflict and that, through its engagement, should contribute to the re-establishment of the interrupted communication, and then help in the achievement of a mutually acceptable solution for the conflicting parties themselves.

Several models of possible mediation are recognized in the theory, depending on the concrete conflict situation. In that context, mediation may involve methods of judicial decision-making, where the third party exercises ultimate compulsion to decide. Of course, the success of this model in terms of the role of perceptions in the conflict can be debatable, especially if the court decision generates a winner-loser solution. Namely, such a solution can only further strengthen the negative perceptions of both, the opponent and the mediator himself, among the losing party. Moreover, dissatisfied with the outcome of the mediator, the losing party can initiate additional activities aimed at further escalation of the conflict.

Arbitration, represents the next model of mediation, which implies proposing a solution or solutions from a third party, that can be binding or non-binding for the conflicting parties. So it is a question of a softer approach compared to the previously indicated one. The third model of mediation, is probably the most acceptable when it comes to a conflict situation in which there are diametrically opposed perceptions between the conflicting parties, and it

only aims to facilitate their communication and provide assistance to the parties to reach their own solution to the conflict.

In this context, especially important instruments of mediation are: providing good services, consultation, facilitation and conciliation.

In resolving disputes and conflicts, very often direct negotiations between the conflicting parties are either deficient (for example, the current relations between Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, etc.), or there are no results from them for a long period of time, so the instrument known as providing good services, is intended to be used. Most of the time, good services for resolving conflicts or disputes are offered by third countries or international organizations that are interested in faster overcoming of emerging problems. Furthermore, situations in which such role is also played by a certain political person, are also not rare. During the implementation of this instrument, the third party basically has the following tasks: establishing communication between the conflicting parties; transfer of views and opinions from one side to the other and vice versa; offer of a place and conditions for a direct meeting if the conflicting parties show interest in it, but without the right to offer solutions to the conflict.

Consultation, as a mediation instrument includes interventions, most often in the form of problem-solving workshops, within a team of consultants works with conflicting parties to strengthen their communication, to diagnose a potential aspects of re-establishing broken relationships, and to facilitate finding a creative solution to the conflict Van der Merve, 1990).

Facilitations, are similar to consultations, except that the facilitator includes a differentiating element, that is, he strives to achieve better and much stronger communication (Wehr, 1979). On the other hand, the facilitator can play a deeper and more central role in the problem-solving process, by seeking to help the parties find a common definition of their relationship, to clearly define their separate goals, and through analysis to find options that would meet everyone's needs.

Conciliation, as an instrument of mediation, is used in situations where the parties are unable, or unwilling to come to the negotiating table and negotiate about the differences. In such situations, the conciliator usually: facilitates exchanges, suggests possible solutions and assists the parties in reaching a mutual compromise.

The purpose of the indicated instruments, is to provide a basis for the initial transformation of conflicts, within which, fear of hatred, mistrust, indecision or apathy can be transformed into empathy. In other words, the goal is to create an environment and conditions in which violent behavior can begin to transform into non-violent one, as well as transformation of the existing contradiction into creativity.

**The impact of stereotypes**

Basically, stereotypes are formed in such a way that people are attributed certain traits solely on the basis of their belonging to a certain group. As such, they mostly work the same way. First, based on certain information, the group to which the individual belongs is determined, and then the characteristics of another member of that group are assigned to him. Here, it should be noted that there is no factual evidence for such claims (conclusions) and that they are based on generalizations of the characteristics assigned to specific groups.

The very division of people based on certain criteria (even when they are arbitrary) encourages group members to define themselves as "us", and others as "them", and to compare each other and make conclusions and judgments about each other.

Immediate conflict between groups over resources or values further intensifies the stereotyping process, ie. the very belonging to a certain group "forces" the members of the opposing group to react stereotypically.

Here, the question inevitably arises, why does anyone even need to stereotype others?

The answer to this question is complex, and the reasons for it can be numerous. Namely, stereotyping can lead people to think that by creating a negative image of others, they can gain control over them, ie. for one party to secure superiority (at least in its own eyes) by declaring the other party an inferior and powerless competitor or adversary. Moreover, through stereotyping, one party can ascribe traits to the other party of their own choosing in order to make themselves appear more valuable, in a way that makes the other party seem less valuable. At the same time, this process allows the opposing party to be seen only through its negative actions and to ignore its positive potentials. It is a characteristic inherent in the role of perceptions in conflict, which was previously elaborated.

Galtung, analyzes the need and goals for stereotyping through the prism of the syndrome: chosenness-fame-trauma, which he directly connects with emotions. According to him, such syndrome is especially present in a culture where there is a division between generations, races, classes, nations, etc.. Hence, there is a selection only for those who consider themselves to be of higher value, as opposed to the devaluation of others. Furthermore, glory is also only for those who have a glorious past, or who have a great mission. Hence, trauma exists only in the famous and the chosen ones, because of their hard efforts and struggles to accomplish the mission (Galtung, 2000).

It turns out that stereotypes are, above all, factors that arise from conflict situations, and not factors that basically cause conflicts, although they can contribute to their aggravation. There is no doubt that stereotyping harms all parties involved in the conflict, because it often locks them into a process in which false stereotypes become the basis for perceiving the real conflict situation. The stereotyped party may try to expose the lie of the stereotype, but after repeatedly ignoring the attempts, they may sometimes give up and start doing exactly what the stereotype suggests.

Hence, the question of a possible way out of such situation, inevitably arises. In this regard, the so-called transcend approach, advocates the thesis that a fair and sustainable solution can only be achieved through activities for raising awareness of the deep structures and cultures of the conflicting parties. Actually, transformed attitudes, goals, strategies and behaviors can be developed only trough such approach,

 At the same time, it should be taken into account that the process of influencing the change of deep cultures is not at all easy and simple. This, among other things, is due to the fact that through myths, collective trauma can exist in a longer historical period and be reactivated in given crisis situations, thus again affecting the conflicting behaviors and goals of the individual or the group.

**The impact of past experience**

Regarding the question about the past experience meaning and its influence on conflict dynamics, Wicks believes that the past offers an experiential framework for the present and the future, but that it also mustn't be a substrate in which they will be rooted. Namely, the present, places the memories of the past on a new surface and processes them with more modern tools, always aware that the future will reap what it/the present has sown.

Experience so far, shows that there are frequent examples of involving past experience in current conflict situations, thereby initiating their further deterioration. The answers to the dilemma of why this happens, can be numerous. Namely, often people allow the past to limit the possibilities of the present and the future as well, because the failure of dealing with the past conflict or conflicts, initiates the perception and attitude in them that they will never be able to resolve the conflict effectively. In such a case, the opposing parties usually think that because they could not solve each other's problems in the past, or because their relationship in the past was reduced to a struggle for dominance over the other party, it would be biased to expect them to do otherwise, i.e. non-conflict behavior. At the same time, the side that advocates such understanding, usually claims that it is actually the opposite side, that cannot change, although this attitude prevents or limits the willingness to change on both sides. However, if one side decides to overcome the past and take steps to improve relations, it is highly likely that the other side will follow suit.

From the aspect of the past experience negative role and influence on conflict dynamics, it can be pointed out that conflict parties are often ready to remember only their negative mutual behavior, while refusing to accept positive potentials, even when the other party manifests more friendly relations in the present. This phenomenon is a typical example of how the past is used to limit the possibility of improving mutual relations and resolving conflicts in the present. Actually, there is no doubt that if during the conflict resolution phase, one of the parties continuously returns to some previous particularly negative behavior of the opposing party, despite the clear statement that such behavior will not be repeated, then the past experience will represent a serious challenge for overcoming of the current conflict.

As a result of previously mentioned, the question of acceptable approaches that can initiate a partial or complete elimination of the past experience influence on current conflict dynamics, inevitably arises. In this regard, one of the possible approaches to neutralizing the negative past influence on the present and future as well, is of course, the mutual reminder of the past events and relations, within both conflicting parties enjoyed a stable partnership and mutual respect. In fact, recalling exactly such periods of mutual positive relations will allow the conflicting parties to approach the conflict constructively. Moreover, for such a constructive approach to conflicts, it is particularly important to keep in mind that every action in the present has its consequences in the future. Hence, it is necessary that the approaches taken to resolve specific conflicts, should be placed on a foundation that will be strong enough to withstand and face the challenges of the future.

Moreover, it should always be kept in mind that the violence reduction is best achieved through constant dialogues and communication. In this context, each side has to tell its truth and thus come to the acceptance of a common truth that reconciles personal passions. In fact, the common truth should always contain the partial truths of the involved conflicting parties and thus initiate a new quality in their mutual relations.

## Conclusion

As it was already pointed out in the paper, conflicts usually attract attention after they are burdened with violent and aggressive behavior between the conflicting parties. From the aspect of the research focus in the paper, it follows that such direct and visible violence in conflicts, is only a late sign about existence of various forms of structural and cultural violence, in the conflict background. Therefore, in addition to the objective ones, subjective factors, such are: perceptions, stereotypes, and the interpretation of past experience, have also a significant place and role in conflict background. At the same time, it should be emphasized that such subjective factors by themselves, do not necessarily initiate the escalation of conflict dynamics, but that, they may represent a significant trigger of this plan on the one hand, as well, a significant determining factor for the success of approaches to dealing with conflicts, on the other side. Hence, their importance and role should not only not be neglected, but on the contrary, continuous efforts and activities are needed to recognize, accept and promote their importance witinh conflict management processes.

In this regard, the existence of a developed awareness that the combination of structural and cultural violence lays the foundations for the emergence of direct violent conflicts, with diametrically opposite goals, interests and positions between the conflicting parties, is also particularly significant.

Therefore, the solution to such situations should be sought in the application of a comprehensive and long-term process for the transformation of both violent structures and cultures, as well as the violence perpetrators themselves, i.e. direct participants in the conflict. At the same time, bearing in mind the previously analyzed characteristics of the subjective factors, it is of course necessary, that within such a transformative process, different perceptions, stereotypes and interpretations of past experiences should be also included.

As the paper analysis shows, these are significant segments of the cultural characteristics of the conflicting groups or parties, which have a serious impact on the dynamics that create the image of the enemy. There is no doubt that the source of violence is in the conflict, but violence certainly does not resolve the conflict. Actually, the cycle of violence begins with a concretely experienced crime, which leads to shock, fear, sadness, rage, and the desire for revenge. On the other hand, revenge itself is a new crime that shocks and evokes the same pointed characteristics. So, aggression and violence cause new aggression and violence. And the roots of violence are in untransformed conflict and in building a rigid image of the opponent as an enemy.

Therefore, the conflict dealing approach must be comprehensive, creative and long-term, involving a wide range of actors and activities at different conflict stages. Namely, it must be aimed at prevention and reduction of differences and causes in the phase before the appearance of violence. Then, it must be aimed at violence reduction and intervention, during the occurrence and escalation of conflict violence, and finally at reconstruction, reconciliation, peace building and conflict resolution, after the violence ends. In this regard, an attention of the aimed activities at transforming the negative subjective factors for conflicts, should be especially paid within the framework of the first, i.e. pre-conflict, as well as within the third, ie. post-conflict phase. Moreover, within the first phase, efforts should create an environment for elimination or reduction of possibility for violent conflict occurrence and its escalation,

while, within the third phase, they should create conditions for eliminating the possibility of violent conflict re-emerging, as well as for effectively transforming and resolving conflict potentials. Actually, the tendency of such approaches, must be aimed at a gradual change of negative perceptions, stereotypes and interpretations of past experience, by offering a new cooperative platform for the conflicting parties, which will allow the reduction of negative subjective aspects and emotions, and hence, opening possibility of re- restoring their mutual trust and respect.

## References

- Assefa, H. (1993): Peace and Reconciliation as a Paradigm. Nairobi Peace Initiative Monograph Series, No.1.

- Azar, E.E. & Burton, J.W. (1986): International Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice. Brighton: Wheatsheaf.

- Boulding, K. (1978): Stable peace. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

- Boulding, K. (1989): Three faces of power. New-burry Park, CA: Sage Publications.

- Buzan, B. (1983): People, States, and Fear: The national security problem in International Relations. Brighton: Wheatshcaf Books.

- Carment, D. & Harvey, F. (2001): Using Force to Prevent Ethnic Violence: An Evaluation of Theory and Evidence. PRAEGER.

- Carment, D. & Schnabel, A. (2003): Conflict Prevention – Path to Peace of Grand Illusion. UNDP.

- Christie, D. J. (1997): Reducing direct and structural violence: the human needs theory. Peace and conflict: Journal of peace psychology. New Jersey: LEA.

- Fisher, R & Keahly, L. (1991): The potential complementarity of mediation and consultation within a contingency model of third party intervention. Journal of Peace rEsearch, Vol.28.

- Galtung, J. (1996): Peace by peacefull means. PRIO: Sage publications.

- Galtung, J. (2000). Conflict transformation by peaceful means. UNDP.

- Giorgi, P. (1999): The origins of violence by cultural evolution. Brisbane: Minerva E&S.

- Gurr, T.R. (1999): Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethno-political Conflicts. USIP.

- Lederach, J.P. (1995): Preparing for peace:  Conflict transformation across cultures. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

- Lind, M. (1996): Preventing Violent Conflicts: Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

- Mitchell, C. (1981): The Structure of International Conflict. London: Macmillan.

- Rupeasinghe, K. (1990): The Disappearing Boundaries between Internal and External Conflicts. Groningen: International Peace Research Association.

- Wallensteen, P. (1998): Preventing Violent Conflict: Past Record and Future Challenges. Uppsala: Uppsala University – Department of Peace and Conflict Studies.

- Wehr, P. (1979): Conflict Regulation. Boulder, CO: Westvew, p.45

- Дадли, В. (1998), Разрешување конфликти, Балкански центар за мир, Скопје: Филозофски факултет.

- Галтунг, Ј. (2005): Разрешување на конфликти. Софиа: СИЕЛА.

- Георгиева, Л. (2004): Превенција на конфликти – од идеја до култура на превенција на конфликти во Македонија. Скопје: Фондација Фридрих Еберт.

- Гоцевски, Т., Ортаковски, В., Георгиева, Л. (1999): Разрешување и трансформација на конфликтите. Куманово: Македонска ризница.

- Мурџева – Шкариќ, О. (2007): Ненасилна трансформација на конфликти. Скопје: Филозофски факултет.