

# Conflict Analysis and Transformation



# Conflict Analysis and Transformation:

*An Introduction for Students,  
Activists and Communities*

By

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I dedicate this book to Mary Ann Morris, my partner in life, who is always willing to reconcile and forgive; and to our sons: Sol, who takes a long time to get angry and who manages to engage in conflict both rationally and calmly; and Dunavan, who is passionate to walk on the path to social justice.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **Who likes Conflict?**

Conflict is a word that conjures up many thoughts and emotions for us. Not surprisingly, most of these are negative. Most of us would rather avoid conflict than engage in it. It is often easier to remain silent than to raise an issue because we don't want to upset someone, don't want to disturb the peace, or don't want to risk missing a promotion or even losing a job. Sometimes, this means we put up with a lousy meal at a restaurant, and sometimes it means we put up with physical, sexual or racial harassment in order to keep a job to feed our families. Sometimes we avoid a conflict situation because the last time we confronted someone or raised a contentious issue, the experience had a negative outcome and we want to avoid a repetition of an unpleasant situation. When it comes to addressing conflict, our responses are shaped by our cultural expectations, our particular experiences and our skills, which are a product of our education and family upbringing. These learned responses to conflict may not always best serve our needs.

For better or worse, it is impossible to avoid conflict. For example, you may be someone who cannot avoid the realities of injustice all around you, if injustice is part of your personal lived experience. If you and your community have been subjected to structural violence in the form of systemic poverty or unequal access to the instruments of justice (such as law enforcement and a fair trial), you recognize that change is required to achieve social justice.

Alternatively, you may be someone who is increasingly aware of injustices via your own privilege. You may be becoming overwhelmed with guilt or with anger and you seek ways to join the struggle. Although one choice is to ignore injustice (as it does not directly affect you), your newly awoken awareness will not allow you to find peace in the status quo.

As we have become better informed and more skilled in critical thinking, we are much more aware of the world around us and of all the

social problems therein. However, having a critical analysis affords us only part of the skill set to make a difference. A critical analysis of our world is necessary but not sufficient if we want to transform our relationships, our communities and our world. Without the ability to effectively problem-solve, we may be able to criticize the war in Syria, for example, but not bother to seek solutions beyond the predictable military intervention or “do nothing” approach. Similarly, in the past few decades, we have become much more aware of the pervasiveness of sexual assault and gender-based violence, and yet, we have recurring examples of court cases where justice has not been achieved. While increasing our critical analysis of the world is not sufficient to bring about justice, it can be sufficient to lead us to feel paralyzed and even hopeless!

At the same time, we need to realize that there is significant positive change happening in our world. In spite of the pervasive narratives like “things are getting worse” or “life used to be way better” (or even “make America great again”!), we need to distinguish between our increasing *awareness* of injustice and an increasing *prevalence* of injustice. These two things are sometimes mistaken to be the same, so that an increased awareness suddenly feels like the situation in the world has never been worse. The most exhaustive analysis of violence trends disputes the fear-mongering claim that the world is becoming more violent.<sup>1</sup> The message that violence is getting worse is as old as history itself, and many leaders capitalize on a culture of fear in order to increase military spending, enlarge oppressive police forces and construct enemies in order to hold onto power.

I want to emphasize the three reasons why believing the world is getting worse (i.e. more violent) is problematic. First, it is important to acknowledge that activists and peacemakers who have come before us have been working very hard, often sacrificing their lives, to create better conditions for humanity. To contend the world keeps getting worse is to ignore their invaluable contributions. Second, to contend that the world is getting more violent (without any reliable data to back it up) contributes unnecessarily to an overriding sense of despair and hopelessness for young activists. Third, by emphasizing the negative, we miss the opportunity to systematically study how positive change comes about.

In summary, conflict is often unpleasant and difficult to navigate. Additionally, as we seek to become more aware of our communities and our world, we expose ourselves to more injustices and conflicts, making conflict avoidance more difficult. Therefore, what we need is a fundamental change in the way we address conflict – we need to better understand conflict and to learn to utilize strategies that will most likely

bring about positive change. Paul Born, a Canadian community builder, states that our issues are becoming more complex but our systems to address them are not keeping up.<sup>2</sup> As we become more aware of the problems we face as humanity, we are faced with choices: ignore, become paralyzed with despair, or collaborate (with friend and foe alike) to seek solutions. Collaboration sounds like the natural choice, but it requires skill.

The purpose of this book is to provide students, activists, community organizers and the general public with a concise and clear guide on how to approach, analyze and address conflict in order to transform relationships and work towards peace with justice. My hope is that this book can be a practical starting place for those who are making conflict transformation a focus of their activism, academic studies or community work, while contemplating conflicts ranging from the interpersonal to international.

This book is meant as a starting point for learners. There are many excellent resources available to assist people to navigate interpersonal conflicts, to implement successful community campaigns, and to work globally for peace and social justice. What makes this book relevant is the bringing together of conflict resolution theory and practice with social activism and peace and justice. I hope this book will take you on a journey where we will connect the tools of conflict management with the academic rhetoric of peace and justice. My intention is to provide a practical and rather short guide to accomplish two important things: 1) demonstrate that solving conflicts is best accomplished with a grounding in peace and justice and 2) demonstrate that peace and justice are not just elusive theoretical concepts, but are tied to a systematic framework of analysis and skills. These two goals come together under a framework of conflict transformation.

## **What is Conflict Transformation?**

A good place to start is to define the underlying process of this book. I apologize in advance for not making it simple enough to fit in one short sentence. As you read this next section, I hope you will appreciate the value of the complexity of the definition and the breakdown and explanations of its interrelated components.

Conflict transformation is a process where parties in a conflict strive for outcomes based on peace and justice. The process necessitates an analysis that goes beyond the immediate crisis and examines underlying issues (injustices) that contribute to the conflict. Conflict transformation consciously prioritizes relationships and the authentic understanding of multiple perspectives. Nonviolent strategies, ranging from nonviolent

action to community reconciliation, are carefully chosen to effectively transform problematic social dynamics to support the well-being of all involved, and to contribute to a culture of peace by promoting nonviolence and the vision that conflict can be an opportunity for positive change.

The term “conflict transformation” was first widely introduced to Peace and Justice Studies by John Paul Lederach, who suggests that the term “transformation” emphasizes the vision that conflict can be a catalyst for positive social change.<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to clarify some of the complexities of the paragraph-long definition of conflict transformation I’d like to take a bit of space to further explore some of the key concepts of the above definition.

### **Peace and justice**

Defining peace can be elusive because it is a very broad term and many people attribute personal meaning to it. In defining an elusive term, it is sometimes helpful to start by defining what it is *not*. We could agree that “peace” is not a synonym for “stability.” It is quite possible to have very stable interpersonal or community relationships that are at the same time not very peaceful. Peace needs to be more closely connected to the concept of justice than to stability or security. Sometimes when we are working towards peace, our relationships and our communities actually become unstable; relationship norms are broken and conflict may escalate when we begin a dialogue on a sensitive topic.

Consequently, in addition to being different from stability, peace is also not the equivalent to the “absence of conflict.” Conflict can be a catalyst to achieving peace. The presence of conflict in a group can actually be a sign of trust. Those with whom we are closest and feel most trusting are often the people with whom we engage in conflict the most.

If left unchallenged, the status quo may entrench and perpetuate injustice against those individuals and groups who do not have power or the ability to be heard. Therefore, by raising awareness of an issue or injustice one often escalates a conflict in order to ultimately bring about peace and justice. Peacemakers can be troublemakers.

In the field of Peace and Justice Studies, peace has been classically defined in terms of negative peace (the absence of violence) and positive peace (conditions where all members of society are able to achieve their social, economic and cultural needs).<sup>4</sup> Positive peace requires an explicit connection to social justice. The United Nations describes a “Culture of Peace” as a set of values, attitudes and traditions that promote human rights, education and nonviolent methods for addressing conflict.<sup>5</sup>

## **Going deeper**

An outburst between two close friends may have been building up for months. A violent attack by a political group may be preceded by years of discrimination. A violent incident between neighbours may have been exacerbated by the economic downturn when the town's largest employer shut down.

When we read or listen to the news, we often just get quick sound bites on the top news stories that frequently cover some large conflict, usually violent. Reports are brief and there is often only enough time to report on the immediate event and consequences. Time and space constraints do not allow for multiple perspectives and complex timelines. Many journalists lament that due to a variety of constraints placed upon their reporting, they are unable to construct in-depth stories, but rather create short sound-bites where relaying a complex analysis of a conflict is impossible.<sup>6</sup>

A conflict transformation approach acknowledges that conflict rarely occurs in isolation. A conflict transformation approach seeks information beyond the presenting situation and beyond mainstream media, to find the narratives of non-elite voices (perspectives of people with less power and influence) and to understand structural causes of events and injustices.<sup>7</sup>

## **Consciously prioritizes relationships**

By nature, we humans are relational and social beings. When we are in conflict, our relationships become filled with tension and sometimes when conflict escalates, our relationships suffer. It sometimes seems that one must choose between addressing a conflict and nurturing a relationship. Sometimes we sacrifice our needs in order to keep friends, or sometimes we sacrifice our friends in order to pursue our desired outcome. There are some instances where relationships are so unhealthy that they warrant severing in order to achieve peace. There are other times where a conflict can put important relationships at risk. Conflict transformation consciously affirms that nurturing relationships is one of the most important components of the process. Moreover, not only can relationships be saved, they might even be improved or transformed.

Conflict transformation is also a process that seeks to build new relations by acknowledging that the power to transform our communities comes from the strength of numbers. Thus, prioritizing relationships includes building friendships, alliances and solidarity where none existed prior.

## **Authentic understanding of multiple perspectives**

A key component to conflict transformation is listening. Listening is not a skill that we have learned particularly well in our families, in our schools or universities. Although listening is a big component of communication, our formal education gives a higher priority to other communication skills such as written and oral expression. In high school and university, we practice the communications skills of argumentation and we listen in order to find fault in the opponent's argument. We hone our skills of research and writing. Active listening, where one listens for the purpose of authentic understanding and validation, is not that difficult to learn, but does take practice as it is unfamiliar to most of us in our normal communication repertoire. What active listening provides us in a conflict situation is the opportunity to authentically understand the other party's perspective. Authentic understanding is not the same as agreement. However, even if the other party appears to be completely wrong, unreasonable or holds a position based on intolerance, understanding their perspective will bring the parties a step closer to figuring out a way forward.

Active listening allows us to engage in perspective taking, where parties in a conflict are required to articulate the issue from an opposing view. Active listening also engages our human ability to empathize, to connect in a way that other forms of communication do not facilitate.

## **Nonviolent strategies**

When powerful people refuse to engage in any process to address a conflict, individuals and groups often resort to violent or nonviolent action in order to raise awareness, gain public support, and put pressure on those in power to come to the table to talk. Nonviolence can be defined as engaging in strategies to achieve these goals, but with tactics that specifically avoid violence. Ultimately, the goal of nonviolent action is to improve the power balance between parties so that authentic negotiations can take place. Nonviolence can also be considered simply as using strategies and tactics to accomplish, without harming ourselves or others what otherwise is considered only to be accomplished through violent means.<sup>8</sup> Nonviolence is used by activists for principled reasons (moral or ethical belief that violence is wrong) or strategic reasons (based on empirical evidence that nonviolent strategies are more effective). Due to both the ethical advantage and the effectiveness of nonviolence, it forms a cornerstone of conflict transformation.



We typically think of violence as visible acts such as hitting, punching, shooting and killing. However, most of the violence in our world is structural. Structural violence refers to harm resulting from formal Structures, cultural practices, customs and laws that ensure unequal access to power, resources and ultimately justice. Without firing any weapon, mechanisms of structural violence can be very harmful. A classic example of structural violence is laws (such as Apartheid in South Africa or the Palestinian Territories) that are put into place so that one ethnic or racial group has a series of advantages, at the expense of another. Because structural violence is much harder to see directly (although the results, such as poverty, increased incidence of disease and high incarceration rates are visible and thus measurable) as compared to direct violence such as murder, war and rape, it is important to take into account the pervasive existence of structural violence when we analyze a conflict.

Here is another example to further understand how structural violence works. At the time of this writing, a trial in the Canadian justice system has just acquitted a Canadian of European descent (i.e. White) in the murder of Colten Boushie, a young Indigenous man. The defense team was able to use legal tactics to ensure that no Indigenous persons would be on the jury. Thus, a legal structure promoted a situation that greatly impeded the possibility that Colten Boushie's family would achieve justice. An all-White jury contributed to the decision that the White defendant was not guilty. Justice is very difficult to attain when laws exist to create a trial that was highly imbalanced in a community that has a long history of racism.<sup>9</sup> When one's race impacts one's ability to achieve a fair trial, this is a form of structural violence.

## **Culture of peace**

Building a culture of peace is a long-term vision, whose ultimate goal is a society in which all members are skilled in conflict transformation. A culture of peace is like a foundation – a common ground where people agree to the importance of addressing conflict non-violently and are equipped with the skills to negotiate, mediate, listen and support each other. Building a culture of peace is a call to build positive, dynamic participatory processes where dialogue is encouraged and conflicts are solved in a spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation. A culture of peace represents a foundation where power is balanced, awareness is high, relationships are nurtured and individuals are skilled. Thus, the conflict transformation process aligns itself with the vision of building a culture of peace – one that promotes dialogue

and nonviolent strategies to tackle the inevitability of conflict and one that emphasizes the seeking of solutions aimed at the root causes of conflict.

### **Positive social change**

A conflict transformation process necessitates a critical analysis of the current and underlying issues. However, this analysis isn't enough to bring about transformation. Conflict transformation requires an achievable vision of what success would look like. Bringing about positive change requires us to be prepared to engage in difficult conversations, escalate tensions, and confront fear and hatred from opponents. Sometimes these antagonistic and adversarial experiences inspire us to demonize the other party, to seek revenge or a "win-lose" outcome (where we, of course, are the winners). The quest for victory can be a surrogate for peace and justice. As you learn more about conflict transformation, you will see the benefits of co-creating a vision where all parties not only participate in the process, but benefit from the outcome.

Creating positive social change also requires some basic skills around problem-solving, negotiation and reconciliation. These processes help us engage in practical and operational strategies to bring visions of social justice to pragmatic outcomes.

### **The Purpose of this Book**

The purpose of this book is to assist anyone from the novice student to the experienced activist in understanding conflict. All of us already have a set of skills we utilize when we are faced with conflict. I hope that reading this book can open your mind up to expanding your repertoire, to increasing your options and even improving the chances for successful outcomes. In this book, I present a simple framework that is comprised of four foundational components (or pathways) of most conflict transformations – from the interpersonal to the international. These four pathways are: power, relationships, awareness and skills. I critically analyze these four themes and provide advice for how people can address them in the context of the comprehensive definition of conflict transformation presented earlier. Positive advances on the four pathways lead us to construct our culture of peace, after which the important process of problem-solving is able to take place.

Reading about conflict transformation is far easier than practicing it. Book learning is essentially an academic exercise, where we take in information through rational thought processes. Experiencing conflict,

however, is often an emotional process, awash with anxiety, fear and hurt. These strong emotions often stand in the way of practicing what we may have learned when we were calmly reading a book! Nonetheless, in spite of the limitations of learning about conflict transformation from a book, it is a positive first step to engaging in authentic practice.

This book is broken down into nine chapters. The next chapter introduces a simple model you can use to describe and analyze a conflict. In this chapter, we will explore the basics of conflict – from the precipitating crisis to the underlying issues. We will spend a bit of time in our heads, asking philosophical questions like: what is knowledge? What is the nature of reality? And we will also reflect on our own biases and values and how they impact our analysis.

Chapter Three introduces the theoretical framework presented in this book. The next four chapters explore, in sequence, the four main pathways of this book's conflict transformation framework. Chapter Four is entitled *Power: from Imbalance to Equality*. Here we deconstruct our concept of power – what it is and why it is necessary to understand power in order to transform conflict. In this chapter we also discuss specific ideas on how to work to balance power among parties and how to work collaboratively in groups that span power differences.

Chapter Five is entitled *Relationships: From Fear to Trust*. Here we describe why good relationships are a cornerstone to the conflict transformation process. We will explore how conflict impedes relationships and discuss ways to improve relations so that the likelihood of positive outcomes for all parties increases.

Chapter Six is entitled *Awareness and Understanding: From "Unknowing" to "Woke."* We look at the broad themes of knowledge, information and awareness, and we consider how to use information most effectively for the purposes of transforming conflict. Chapter Seven is entitled *Building Skills: From Passion to Competence*. We examine the pitfalls of activism, such as burnout and intra-group conflict. We highlight ways in which individuals and groups can be aware of potential barriers to effective conflict transformation processes, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal communication skills and the development of positive group dynamics in order to be effective conflict transformers. While Chapters Four through Seven explore the four pathways to bring us to a culture of peace, Chapter Eight examines the skills of problem-solving, negotiating and reconciling.

As I stated earlier, this book is meant to be a starting point – hopefully a way to consider ideas that you did not think of before, a way to affirm things you already know and a means to inspire you to get involved in making your

relationships and your community better. You may be a natural peacemaker who wants to improve your effectiveness. You may be someone who avoids conflict, or someone who wants to move beyond past negative experiences. Being a great peacemaker involves knowing, being and doing. But the easiest of these three, which includes reading a book like this, is knowing. I hope this book can be part of your path to understanding and critically thinking about conflict, conflict transformation, peace and justice.

### **Main Points of this Chapter**

Because conflict is usually unpleasant, we often try to avoid it.

By avoiding conflict, we potentially miss an opportunity to transform relationships, behaviors and structures that are harmful to both individuals and groups.

Our skills of critical analysis have vastly improved with our higher levels of education. However, our ability to respond to conflict in transformative ways is lacking.

Conflict Transformation is a holistic process that explicitly seeks peace with justice for all parties involved.

Conflict Transformation has a complex definition and encompasses concepts of peace, justice, relationships, multiple perspectives, nonviolence, culture of peace and positive social change.

The purpose of this book is to introduce the reader to a systematic framework from which one can analyze and approach conflict by building a foundation (culture of peace) and by using appropriate skills and tactics.

This book is a starting point – learning new knowledge is a launching point for the harder work of “doing” and “being”.

### **Reflection Questions**

Think of what you already know about conflict and the ways you approach conflict in your life. What has worked well for you?

Think of a conflict that turned out poorly. While reading this book, reflect on how a different analysis and approach could have assisted in improving the outcome.

# CHAPTER TWO

## CONFLICT ANALYSIS

### **Introduction**

Imagine you are a school teacher in a class of six year-olds. One of your students comes to you, crying, and says that another student has hit him. Probably one of the first things you will want to do is to find out what happened. You listen to the heart-wrenching story of how this sweet little child was minding his own business when out of nowhere he is physically assaulted, and now his arm hurts and there is blood on his shirt. As you become incensed at this injustice, you prepare to punish the offender, but when you approach him, he starts to tell you a story of how the other boy has been teasing him all week about how ugly his clothes are. Then a couple of bystanders add that a third boy dared the perpetrator to hit the other boy. Suddenly, what you think is a straightforward case of right and wrong becomes much more complicated.

In this chapter, I will introduce a conflict analysis model as a way to methodically approach situations that may otherwise seem very confusing. Conflict analysis is connected to conflict transformation, but it can also be considered a separate process. Conflict analysis is fundamental. Without a systematic analysis, it is difficult to engage in the most appropriate strategies and is challenging to arrive at desired outcomes. Conflict analysis helps us understand what is going on and prepares us to make a plan.

We will begin by dispelling some commonly held myths about conflict. We'll then dig deep and talk about reality and knowledge – to deconstruct our foundations in order to aid us to be better conflict analysts. The main part of this chapter will follow – the roll-out of a 6-point framework for analyzing conflict. Finally, we will discuss exercises and activities that can make conflict analysis more effective. But first – a simple definition of conflict.

## **Defining Conflict**

Conflict can be described as a perceived disagreement or dispute between two or more parties. A conflict can be between two or more people, groups of people in a community, or nations. For the purposes of this book, we will refer to a person (or group of people) that represents a particular perspective on a conflict as a “party.” One might argue that a conflict does not exist until an overt tension develops between two parties. However, I think it is also reasonable to consider that a conflict can have an embryonic phase – that period when one party may be upset (and thus their thoughts, feelings and actions are impacted) but the other party might not yet be aware of the issue. A conflict might become explicit after the occurrence of a particular event – something that brings the tension out in the open.

## **Myths about Conflict**

Although there is no universally accepted manner in which to solve conflict, author Dudley Weeks argues that there exists a universal distaste for conflict.<sup>1</sup> Our collective and universal distaste for conflict has contributed to widely held ideas about conflict that in general are unhelpful and obscure us from a truer picture of the potential transformative possibilities. Here are a few commonly held myths about conflict:

### **1. Everything was just fine until the conflict started**

Sometimes conflict hits us in a way that is unpleasant and leaves us longing for the time before the conflict began. Conflict can tear communities apart and leave people pining for the old times. However, reality reminds us that the time preceding the moment a conflict comes “out in the open” is often fraught with tension, poor relations and injustice. A single act carried out by one party may signal a start of overt tension, but digging deeper usually reveals a series of preceding incidents or omissions and misunderstandings. When we hear someone say “everything was just fine before....” it could mean that tension was covert, or simply that no one talked about it.

## **2. The conflict is limited to the immediate or presenting issue**

Our minds are conditioned to link cause and effect, and this task is much easier when we locate the cause and the effect as closely related to each other in time. The temptation is to simplify situations that are often very messy and complex. We seek quick explanations for what is wrong in our hope to also find quick fixes. However, a presenting issue is usually only a visible manifestation of multiple issues that need to be considered.

## **3. You need to get back to the baseline as quick as possible**

Conflict doesn't need to be viewed like removing a bandage: let's get this over with quickly! Having said that, being in conflict does usually make us uncomfortable. The problem is, unlike bandage removal, jumping to conflict solutions is no guarantee that the pain will be short-lived. In fact, lack of careful consideration of the issues will likely cause the wounds to get worse! The quickest possible solution might not be the best.

## **4. Conflict resolution means getting back to the place you started (the baseline)**

The problem with going back to the way things were is: often the way things were *was* the problem in the first place. When we say we want to get back to the way things were, we usually are longing for the stability and lack of overt tension. What we really want to get to, however, is a situation where the conditions that led to the overt tension are addressed and conditions are transformed. So, we don't want to go back, we want to go forward.

## **5. People who initiate conflict are not peacemakers**

We have many names for people who seem to initiate conflict – one of the gentler terms is “troublemaker.” We often say: “why did you have to go and say that?” or “everything was just fine until you....” Sometimes it is true – there are people who seem to raise issues and push buttons with no apparent vision for making things better. However, if we say conflict transformation is a process to address injustices and to build cultures of peace, then we need to reframe our perspective of people who initiate difficult but potentially healing processes. If we study the history of any social movement, those people who raised contentious issues usually became really unpopular (and often died for speaking out). We call them

peacemakers in retrospect, long after the tension has died down and we can appreciate the benefits of their efforts. It seems that we find it a lot easier to celebrate peacemakers after they are dead. When they are alive, they often make us feel uncomfortable.

Sometimes conflict can be traumatic and sometimes raising contentious issues can make things worse. That is why it is valuable to study it – to reflect on what conditions make it more likely to be positive or transformative, and to learn the skills to be more in control of the outcomes of a conflict. Please read on.

### **Before We Start Analyzing...**

I think this would be a good time to ask one of those existential questions: what is reality? Are the objects around me what I think they are? Perhaps every time you look into the side rear view mirror of a car and read the warning: “objects in this mirror are closer than they appear.” you are reminded of how our understanding of reality is sometimes influenced by faulty perceptions or unfounded assumptions. In order for us to authentically analyze conflict, it is worthwhile to take a few minutes to consider reality. One of the foundations of our definition of conflict transformation is that there are multiple perspectives on any conflict situation. What this really conveys is that the perception of what is true (reality) is going to be different for the various parties in a conflict.

### **Social Construction of Reality**

Social construction of reality is a perspective that acknowledges that our understanding of the world is constructed through social interaction, through shared experiences and through culture. Therefore, one can say that reality is being continuously constructed through people’s actions and interactions that co-create a shared understanding that is experienced as objectively factual and personally meaningful.<sup>2</sup> A foundational tenet of a social constructionist perspective is that an objective truth is often elusive and thus it forces us to soften our stance when faced with a group or an individual who insists they have the truth, or conversely, when *we* think we have the truth. The goal, then, for conflict transformation (using a social constructionist paradigm) is to seek understanding in addition to seeking what is right and what is wrong. There are times when knowing the truth is very important, like in a criminal investigation. However, what social constructionism helps us navigate is the meaning people attach to things and to phenomena. Social constructionists acknowledge that



conflict emerges through an interactive process based on the search for and creation of shared meaning.<sup>3</sup> Social constructionism is not an excuse to ignore facts or dismiss another's understanding. For example, one cannot say that the tree outside your building does not exist. A social constructionist would agree that it exists and they would want to understand the reasons why one person may want to worship it while the next person may want to cut it down.

Social constructionism is often contrasted against a realist or modernist paradigm, where knowledge is argued to be more fixed, and the role of science is to "discover" new information. Another way that the realist paradigm and social constructionism differ is in their understanding of the role of the person seeking knowledge (such as a scientist or even someone conducting a conflict analysis). A realist paradigm would require the scientist and the inquiry to be neutral, value-free and vetted for biases. A social constructionist inquiry, on the other hand, openly acknowledges that any process of analysis is inherently biased and value-laden. Even the decision of what we choose to study is based on our culture and our values.

Let me give you an example. A number of years ago, I studied Spanish in a language school in a tourist town in Guatemala. During our orientation, the school's coordinator announced that a major international drug company was looking for subjects for a clinical trial for a new kind of antibiotic to prevent what is referred to as traveller's diarrhea (intestinal bacterial infection in people who may not be accustomed to the pesky bugs in tropical countries). The remuneration for participation was 250 American dollars, which is about a month's wages for the average worker in Guatemala. As people asked questions and more information was given, the recruiter revealed that the current antibiotic used for treatment actually was quite effective in killing the intestinal invaders; the problem was that it had a side effect of making the user prone to sunburn. Interesting! So what would a scientist using a realist paradigm have to say about this? They might focus on the rigorous double-blind methodologies that would be implemented in drug tests so that the results will be reliable and reproducible. And someone operating from the social constructionist paradigm? They probably would not dispute the results of the rigorous drug trials, but might instead seek to understand why this drug trial was given priority in the first place. What biases prioritized the search for an antibiotic that didn't cause sunburn (an issue that is a very low priority for the majority of Guatemalans who are of Mayan Indigenous heritage)? How does the \$250 incentive prioritize a certain type of study and the resultant information over other important health questions?

There are many more examples we could explore, (like our societal shifts over time in our perspectives of issues such as parental rights and corporal punishment of children, homosexuality, or sexual harassment) that demonstrate our reality is constructed by socially dynamic processes that result in collective meanings. Conflict arises when these collective meanings clash. Therefore, any conclusions we draw from our own inquiries offer an interpretation of our study focus, not an exact picture of it.<sup>4</sup> Although we have rigorous scientific methods to discover new information, the process of even choosing what we will study is socially constructed. The process by which a scientific inquiry is chosen, the type of research methods chosen for the study, and ultimately how the findings are disseminated and acted upon are highly influenced by social interactions which we simply assume are in essence a “natural, taken for granted reality.”<sup>5</sup>

A concept closely related to reality is knowledge. Knowledge consists of ideas, stories, beliefs and explanations that are transmitted socially between individuals and groups. Shared knowledge is one important aspect of culture. It is important to ask how we come to know things. Who is anointed with the privilege of being called knowledgeable? What types of knowledge are considered better than others? It is evident that written information from dominant culture sources tends to be prioritized and held in higher regard. An oral history from an elderly person may be valued less than the knowledge of an expert with university degrees and a long list of publications. In becoming a critical consumer or seeker of knowledge (which is necessary as a conflict analyst) one must critically analyze the sources of our knowledge and how we have constructed our information. I recall debating a Canadian journalist on this issue regarding who would be considered an expert informant concerning a violent conflict in the Philippines. According to her, it was far more reliable to speak to someone from the American embassy in Manila than with someone representing either of the parties in the regional conflict. Her rationale was that the embassy staff were not biased. However, a social constructionist would assert that the embassy staff do in fact have biases, and that we need to critically analyze the power and space we give to “expert” knowledge.

Conflict is an inherently social process and people in conflict co-construct their reality. Augsberger eloquently sums it up as follows: “Conflict is a crisis that forces us to recognize explicitly that we live with multiple realities and must negotiate a common reality; that we bring to each situation differing – frequently contrasting – stories and must create together a single shared story with a role for each and for both.”<sup>6</sup>

## Model for Conflict Analysis

Below is a table that outlines the six steps of our conflict analysis framework. Each step is represented by a question. The following sections expand on each step in order to appreciate how a solid analysis of the conflict is necessary in the process of conflict transformation.

**Table 2-1: Framework for Conflict Analysis**

Question	Points to Consider
1. What is the conflict about?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- describe the immediate situation</li> <li>- describe the underlying context</li> </ul>
2. Who are the parties?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- consider all parties that are stakeholders in the conflict process and outcome</li> </ul>
3. What are the parties' positions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- define what each party wants as an outcome</li> </ul>
4. What are the parties' interests?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- describe the underlying needs, feelings, interests and values that influence each parties' position</li> <li>- determine whether any values, feelings and/or needs are mutually shared among the parties</li> </ul>
5. What tactics have been used in the conflict?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- determine whether tactics are based on power, rights or interests</li> <li>- assess the historical or typical methods of addressing conflict, and their effectiveness</li> </ul>
6. How is the conflict escalating/de-escalating?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- consider both positive and negative impacts of the escalation and de-escalation</li> </ul>

### 1. What is the conflict about?

Any analysis begins with this simple question. To mount a satisfactory response, one must consider the immediate situation as well as the underlying context in which the conflict erupted.<sup>7</sup> The immediate situation is the issue or crisis that brought the conflict into the parties' awareness;

the event or action that made everyone conscious that something was wrong. The underlying context refers to longer term patterns in the relationship over time. This may include unresolved issues that are resistant to change and long-standing structures of injustice that, over time, contributed to the immediate event.

If we apply these questions to an interpersonal conflict, it might look like this: Victor and Alexis have been a couple for a number of years. Alexis works as a city administrator while Victor stays at home and cares for their two pre-school children. One day, Victor purchases a new car – the action that constitutes or evokes the immediate situation or crisis. Victor bought the car without consulting Alexis, and Alexis is angry. Her anger stems not only from not being consulted, but also from her concerns about the financial burden this purchase will place on the family. Instead of being excited about the new car, Alexis is angry and argues with Victor. Victor responds by bringing up some old unresolved issues in their relationship, like his perceived lack of financial autonomy, ongoing delaying of personal purchases and his longstanding dissatisfaction with not working outside the home. Alexis also raises longstanding relational issues, such as her perceived lack of social life and close friends since they moved to an unfamiliar city to be nearer to Victor's extended family. As has happened many times before, the argument escalates until the point that Victor says he is going to his parents for the weekend to visit, and will be taking their two children with him. Alexis lets him go, hoping the time apart will allow their anger to cool off. When the weekend is over, Victor returns, his mood happy and his demeanor conciliatory. He brings Alexis some favorite baking from his mother as a peace offering. Alexis responds kindly. The family goes on a Sunday afternoon outing without discussing the car and they have a great time.

In this short example, the “immediate situation” could be described as the purchase of the car. Going deeper, one can understand the various longstanding and underlying issues that contribute to the immediate crisis. One could even go deeper by analyzing the dominant culture in which Victor and Alexis live. What are the expectations regarding gender roles and work? What are culturally appropriate conflict performances for men and women and married couples? How does consumer debt impact long-term relationships? Although this scenario is quite simplistic, already complexities and ambiguities are evident. For example, if Victor were the one conducting the conflict analysis, he might overlook the car purchase as the immediate crisis. Instead, he might name the ensuing argument (that erupted when Alexis found out about the car) as the immediate situation or presenting crisis. It may not always be necessary to achieve full agreement

among conflicting parties and analyzers as to what the immediate issue is, but disagreement will necessitate a thorough analysis of all the contributing factors.

Let's explore another example, using a conflict between two groups. There is a group of environmental activists using nonviolent techniques to block the path of industrial vehicles that are transporting equipment to construct a new oil pipeline. The confrontation escalates and five environmentalists are arrested. Based on this short description, we might say that the immediate situation is the demonstration. However, another perspective would be to say the conflict became a crisis when the government approved the new pipeline despite public opposition and that the confrontation (blockade) was an example of a tactic used by one party to respond to the conflict.

An analysis of the underlying context would include an understanding of the relationship between extractive industries and environmental groups in this region of the world. It would also require an analysis of the government role, the perspectives of the public, the level of awareness amongst the general public, and the role of law enforcement and the courts. You could go deeper to critique dominant culture understandings of how we measure economic progress.

If this case study were from Canada, an analysis of the underlying context would need to also include an understanding of traditional Indigenous land rights and the historical patterns of relations between Indigenous interests and colonial government interests. This would then require an understanding of environmental law, and patterns of how environmentalist and extractive industry positions have interacted in the past. Is there a long history of defeats for those struggling for environmental issues in the region? Are there recent changes to the long-standing trend?

## **2. Who are the parties?**

The party refers to the individual or group that rallies around some relatively united perspective on the conflict situation. A party may be a coalition of individuals who have come together in solidarity around a particular issue. Sometimes a party is united by their identity. In simple conflicts, there are usually two parties. In the first example above, the two parties would be Victor and Alexis. In the second example, the two parties could be identified as the group of environmentalists united in their position to halt the pipeline, and the company hired to build the pipeline.

Sometimes when we explore the underlying context of a conflict, more stake-holding parties emerge. For example, we can encounter simplistic analyses of the current war in Syria. Some analysts state that the war is between two factions in Syria; some state that it is a war on terror (thus the two parties are the terrorists and those fighting terrorism); and some might even say it is a conflict between the good guys (us) and the bad guys (them). A simplification of complex conflicts is appealing. However, a more complex analysis, as presented by political commentator Phyllis Bennis, counts no fewer than seven conflicts (each with a specific set of parties) that are manifested in the Syrian war.<sup>8</sup> It stands to reason that identifying all the parties is a necessary component in seeking authentic solutions to a large and long-standing conflict such as the Syrian war.

### **3. What are the parties' positions?**

In a conflict situation, each party typically articulates what they want to happen for them to have achieved a satisfactory outcome. A position could be considered the party's requested outcome. In the first example above, Victor's position is to buy a car. Alexis' position is to not buy a car. In the second example, one group's position is to build a pipeline while the other group's position is to stop the building of the pipeline. Positions highlight differences and are often starting points in negotiation processes. During labor-management talks, the workers' position might be a five percent wage hike plus improved pension benefits. Meanwhile, management's position is a two percent wage hike with no change to pension benefits. Differing positions can situate parties in oppositional stances. The parties may use various tactics of power and persuasion to try to make the other party accept their position.

A competent conflict analyst must take caution in articulating each party's position. A common misstep carried out by people who are heavily invested in a conflict is to misrepresent the position of one of the parties. In misguided, ideologically or politically motivated publicity campaigns, this may be done intentionally in order to de-legitimize the other party. Here are some examples. In describing a group of environmental activists, a journalist described their position as "...a small number of activists who are entirely focused on tearing down the Canadian economy."<sup>9</sup> I think it is fair to say that the expressed position of the environmentalists is not to have a ruined economy. In another example, a well-known American televangelist describes the position of a reproductive rights group: "Planned Parenthood is teaching kids to fornicate, teaching people to have adultery, every kind of bestiality, homosexuality, lesbianism - everything that the Bible