

# Countering Dynamics of Violence – The Vital Role of Emotions in Individual Conflict Transformation

Oliver Fink

## Executive Summary

Emotions are a substantial aspect of reality within intergroup conflict. How can conflict transformation processes address and include emotions adequately? And which distinct emotions should be addressed? Whether practitioners put psychosocial approaches at the center of their work, or see them merely as an obstacle to achieving sustainable outcomes, emotional dynamics have to be taken into account. While *interpersonal* psychology has explored the role of emotions in some depth (Lazarus, 2006), *intergroup* conflict transformation such as peace mediation is only starting to grapple more deeply with psychological aspects. A new range of studies from the Occupied Palestinian Territories looks at emotional mechanisms within intergroup conflict settings. This Policy Brief suggests strategies on how to include emotions in conflict transformation approaches. This is especially relevant during conflict escalation as the intensification may elicit particularly destructive emotional dynamics making conflict transformation more difficult. Since emotions fluctuate stronger than other constructs relevant to social action, they might provide promising targets for individual conflict transformation. In this way, practitioners could start harnessing the predictive power of emotional constructs on collective action and social change.

The paper is inspired by recent considerations of emotions in peace practice (Rifkind, 2022; Ryffel, 2021) and is based on three years of field research on associations between emotions and support for political violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Fink, 2022). The Policy Brief presents empirical guidance on *how* peace mediators and practitioners could address emotional mechanisms to reduce violence. It does

*not* include direct instructions but intends to broaden the understanding of group emotional processes of the conflict-affected population to increase the latitude of conflict transformation interventions:

1. Focusing on anger instead of humiliation can help facilitate *nonviolent* social action even under conflict escalation conditions.
2. If incorporating affective constructs, individual *and* group emotions should be included in peace deliberations.
3. Strengthening emotional responses such as empathy – facilitated for example through intergroup encounters – can influence individual conflict transformation positively.

## Introduction

### Why Emotions Matter

Over the last decades, a growing body of literature has recognized the importance of emotional mechanisms in intergroup relations (Iyer & Leach, 2008) and intergroup conflict (Petersen, 2002). Emotions shape the setting of conflict transformation and peace mediation as they substantially drive behavior (Keltner & Gross, 1999). Scholars have studied the association between emotions and collective action of diverse emotions such as hope (Leshem, 2017) or empathy (Cikara, Bruneau & Saxe, 2011), but also anger, hate, and humiliation (Halperin,



2016). Emotions influence support for policy preferences regarding adversaries (Halperin et al., 2011), contribute to decision making after terror attacks (Skitka et al., 2006), influence positions on peace agreements and reconciliation (Tam et al., 2007), and affect engagement in violent as well as nonviolent collective action (Hasan-Aslih et al., 2019). Conflicts might start initially about real disagreements, but our inability to solve them is mostly linked to psychosocial entrenchment (Hameiri et al., 2014). While discrete emotions are normally considered to have a *distinct* influence on behavior, more recent attention has focused on the *situational* impact of emotions, particularly conflict intensification and escalation events as social context is known to impact emotional effects on collective action tendencies in intergroup conflict (Spanovic & Lickel, 2010). Overall, we need a nuanced and specific understanding of emotional dynamics based on empirical psychological research.

### Emotions and Conflict Transformation

Conflict transformation refers to a process in which parties to a dispute consciously work towards a modification of the various dimensions of a conflict with the short-term objective of prevention or at least intensity reduction of renewed violence and with the long-term objective of sustainable peace (Goetschel, 2009). Conflict dimensions include *relational* and *interactive* aspects of framing and understanding contested issues. Conflict transformation frameworks refer to the importance not only of elites and political leaders but also of social intermediaries, such as business people, teachers, religious or traditional authorities, as well as grass-roots movements that include non-state actors, civil society, and private sector representatives (Goetschel, 2009). Knowledge about micro factor dynamics and particularly emotional mechanisms could give valuable input to a wide range of academic and applied transformation approaches. Since emotions fluctuate much more than other constructs relevant to social action such as political affiliations or religiosity, they might

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provide promising targets for individual conflict transformation. As substantial constructivist and relational aspects of conflict settings, emotions should be included in mediation and conflict transformation processes (Bramsen & Poder, 2018; Goetschel, 2009).

Emotions are arguably particularly powerful under *conflict intensification* condi-

tions. This is when peace mediation is most needed and at the same time most difficult. Unfortunately, also emotions tend to unfold their more destructive dynamics under acute escalation – confrontational emotions such as anger or hate, but also fear are elicited, while ‘positive’ emotions such as empathy or hope are decreased. Nevertheless, maybe most importantly, constructivist elements of conflict transformation such as emotions can be *changed* with adequate approaches such as emotion regulation to overcome psychological barriers in intergroup conflict (Halperin et al., 2011). Before considering regulating interventions though, we should aim to *analyze* and *understand* the broader emotional dynamics of people mired in difficult intergroup conflict settings.

### Findings - Emotional Conflict Analysis and Individual Conflict Transformation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, 2017-2020

The regularly ongoing cycles of violence and continuing repression in the Middle East highlight one of the world’s most symbolic protracted intergroup conflicts. A short Policy Brief such as this one cannot do justice to the complexity of ensuing conflict dynamics nor the level of human suffering and threat experienced by both groups. Nevertheless, I want to point out several empirical aspects of ‘emotional conflict analysis’ and suggest applications of these insights for peace mediation and conflict transformation in asymmetric protracted conflicts involving militarized repression and resistance. The research is based on mixed methods fieldwork in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories over three years. To better understand how emotional mechanisms predict – mainly violent



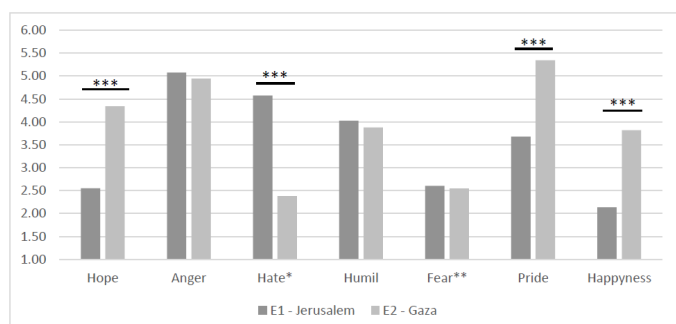


– political action moderated by different types of conflict intensification, I conducted several longitudinal surveys in the Occupied Palestinian Territories during relative calm and different surges of conflict escalation. To investigate the exact mechanisms of how emotions predict *violent* action under different conflict escalation settings, I surveyed two samples of West Bank Palestinians (N = 200, 450) before and during different escalations using a longitudinal design. Escalation contexts included the US embassy's highly publicized move to Jerusalem which led to widespread unrest in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the so-called 'Gaza Marches of Return', and a full lockdown of Ramallah by the Israeli army. Particular focus was placed on negative activating emotions such as anger, humiliation, and hate, as well as on the distinction between individual- versus group emotions. Finally, using qualitative life narratives of formerly violent activists, I outlined how – in the light of entrenchment and escalatory interrelations – constructive social change towards nonviolent peace activism can be possible.

## Which Distinct Emotions to Focus On?

Intergroup conflicts, particularly conflict escalations, are defined by a variety of emotional experiences, resulting in diversified emotional profiles (see Figure 1). While the first mapped escalation scenario was heavily influenced by an issue central to the conflict – the status of Jerusalem – that led to widespread rioting and street violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the second one was linked to the generally remotely experienced violence of the Gaza 'Marches of Return' which affected Westbank Palestinians mainly indirectly via media channels.

**Figure 1:** Emotional Profile Comparison between Escalation Contexts



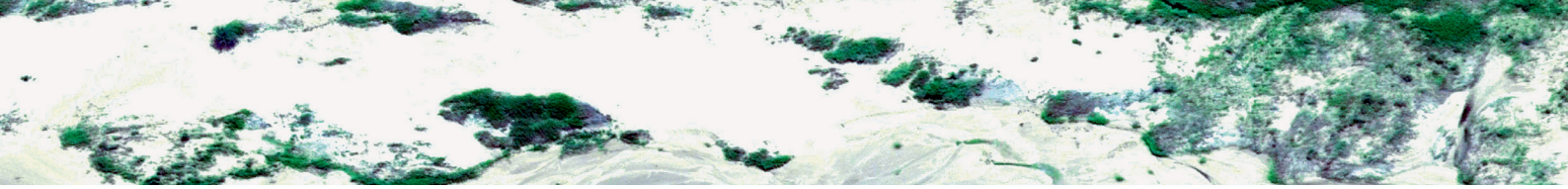
Out of the complex emotional profiles displayed, which emotions should mediators focus on in their efforts? Which 'negative' ones might be most promising to be transformed into adequately positive ones or at least can be mitigated in their effect? In the research, I was focusing particularly on anger and humiliation. Anger is a *confrontational approach emotion* associated with violent and nonviolent behavior. For humiliation, while described as negative and destructive, it is less clear how *approach-oriented* it is, because aggression but also withdrawal, and even self-destructive behavior are reported. Controlling for demographic factors, I examined the behavioral impact of each emotion. Anger predicted violence *as well as* nonviolent means of resistance such as boycott under 'normal' repression conditions while under direct escalation, humiliation is 'taking over' but with a decidedly negative twist. While anger predicts *both* action tendencies, humiliation – under status-linked escalations – not only *predicts violence* but also seems to *suppress nonviolence*, the situational context moderating their effect.

In conclusion, out of several emotions elicited during conflict escalation, anger seems the one closest associated with nonviolent action. As humiliation is generally destructive, avoiding humiliating communications, trying to reframe contexts, or at least acknowledging anger either *within* mediation settings or in motivation *for* peaceful conflict transformation seems obvious but is still disregarded often enough.

## Individual- or Group Emotions – Two Roads to Violence?

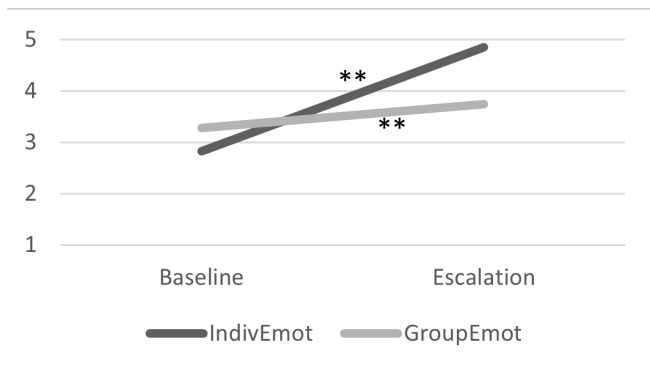
In the above study, I was considering emotions in the form of *group* emotions (Smight & Mackie, 2007). This intergroup-emotions perspective might provide a refined solution to how individuals' emotions 'become political'. Including emotional constructs derived from the broader population might offer inroads to the 'at the table' versus 'beyond the table' challenges frequently experienced in peace mediation considerations. But is it *exclusively* the group level that matters? In social psychology, the focus is on the *interaction* between the individual ('I') and group ('we') and how the environment is given meaning (Reynolds et al., 2010). Research on self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1994) indicates that identity ebbs and flows in a dynamic process between the individual and collective self as a function of contextual configurations such as particular conflict escalations.





Combining negative action-relevant emotions namely anger, humiliation, and hate into single measurements, I find not only that both clusters increase under escalation compared to a baseline setting, but that again the way they explain support for violence changes based on the escalation context.

**Figure 2: Means of Experienced Emotions between Contexts**



For low-power group members experiencing these escalations, distinctive profiles of individual- versus group emotions are not only intensified even during *indirectly* experienced conflict intensifications but more importantly shape their agentic response. Specifically, for intense but mainly *indirectly* experienced conflict escalations, such as the above-mentioned ‘Gaza Marches of Return’, *group* emotions predicted violent collective action, while for *directly* experienced conflict events, such as local checkpoint harassment, *individual* emotions predicted violent engagement.

To facilitate conflict transformation for individuals, referring to either individual-, group- or both types of emotional mechanisms depending on the *nature of the escalation* might be most adequate, covering both possible paths to collective violence.

**Individual Conflict Transformation – The Role of Empathy**

In my considerations of conflict escalation, I have examined emotional constructs normally considered negative such as anger or humiliation. How about positive emotions such as

empathy or hope? Especially intergroup empathy is deemed immensely powerful for triggering prosocial conciliatory behavior, but at the same time considered notoriously elusive. In our quantitative field data, ‘positive’ emotions didn’t play any role in conflict escalation predicting collective action. Can they still be influential, for example regarding mechanisms of *change* from confrontative- to peace activism? How can we understand the entire emotional repertoire triggering a constructive transformation in the presence of social dominance and experienced oppression?

I managed to examine a small dataset of change narratives from Palestinian activists turning from violence to peaceful reconciliatory collective action. For 75% of the participants, the change process was triggered by an unforeseen direct or indirect encounter in contrast to the normally experienced negative power asymmetry. In 58% of the cases, this informal encounter triggered empathy towards the outgroup, combined with hope for peaceful relationships, leading in 91% of cases to a cognitive reappraisal of their situation concerning the conflict context achieving a new sense of coherence. Preliminary data from change processes of the Israeli advantaged group confirms the general sequence structure of the factors.

One possible application of the results might be to facilitate appreciative intergroup encounters, for example within ‘Track Two’ conflict mediation settings including the other two guiding principles. Enhancing the structured encounter with mutual narrative exercises to facilitate perspective-taking – generally considered the more ‘cognitive’ aspect of empathy – might require further research.

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In conclusion, while social problems such as intergroup repression and violence are complex and multicausal, specific psychological processes contribute substantially to these issues. Researchers claim it doesn’t always need much for social transformation – small but precise ‘wise interventions’ (Walton, 2014) can produce considerable benefits. These interventions need to be based on careful analysis of the underlying psychological mechanisms to be so powerful.





Complementing existing psychologically rooted methodologies, addressing these questions will help us create distinct psychological theories of and solutions to social problems. It provides psychologists opportunities to collaborate with practitioners in local settings, with other social scientists, and with policymakers.

## Discussion

Emotions, including group emotions, are found in a wide range of social settings, are particularly relevant during conflict escalation, and are subject to situative-contextual dynamics. Generally, these mechanisms can be harvested for conflict transformation. Nevertheless, the findings from the Occupied Palestinian Territories might not generalize to all conflict settings but be particularly limited to asymmetric conflicts including protracted military oppression where one would expect to find similar dynamics. Also, the study focus was on disadvantaged-group mechanisms. It is known from the literature that advantaged-group needs are different (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008) and additional emotional constructs are relevant. Our preliminary data on emotional advantaged-group change suggests for example that in their case increase in empathy and perspective-taking was associated with guilt and shame rather than hope. Furthermore, I want to acknowledge intercultural differences. The humiliation aspect for example might be particularly pronounced in ‘culture of honor’ settings. Finally, assuming no trauma impairment in the sense of clinical psychology or psychiatric diagnosis, but ‘healthy individuals’, to the extent that this can be the case in repressive protracted intergroup conflict settings.

## Conclusion - Policy Implications & Practitioner Recommendations

Innovative trans- and interdisciplinary social science findings enable scholar-practitioners to create empirically-grounded (psychological) conflict analysis as a basis for social intervention on emotions in conflict settings. These analyses can help to inform vital peacebuilding efforts in urgent, chaotic contexts such as conflict escalation. I sincerely hope that insights from these field studies will help guide the efforts of those who strive to transform intergroup conflict and establish sustainable peace in places where it is genuinely needed and suggest the following recommendations:

### For Policymakers

- » Insights on intergroup emotions provide possibilities but also unique challenges to specific policy processes. Limited time during conflict escalation may constrain the ability to fully harness the promise of utilizing emotional analysis tools, without partnering with informed Multi-Track mediators, scientific scholar-practitioners, or advocacy NGO actors beforehand (Hook, 2021).
- » As insights must be transformed into context-specific evidence-based theories of social change to generate precise ‘wise interventions’, seek out collaborations with relevant actors such as scholar-practitioners, conflict researchers, NGOs, civilian protection advocates, and local experts. This includes recommendations for further studies on mediation processes and outcomes to develop for example psychosocial mediation approaches that take group emotions into account.
- » Request that the relevant actors assist with identifying empirically grounded key psychosocial conflict patterns based on local knowledge. To fully appreciate the context, consult a transdisciplinary diversified pool of actors including Multi-Track mediators and conflict scholars, and recognize psychological and local experts as thematic authorities in addition to understanding their context.





## For Practitioners Focused on Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

- » If not done yet, invest time in understanding scholar-practitioner approaches to the association of emotions - violent versus nonviolent conflict behavior so that you can refine the patterns and variables to your local context. Recognize and acknowledge the 'psychological truth' of people caught in the dreadful realities of inter-group conflict.
- » Request, support, and attend capacity training courses that provide information on psychological mechanisms as well as best practices for information gathering and individual conflict transformation such as emotional framing. Solicit grants to adapt these training courses to your local areas of influence. Don't limit yourself here to the – very valuable – dynamics of 'classic' psychosocial approaches such as trauma coping and individual resilience but harness the predictive power of emotional mechanisms on collective action and social change.
- » Develop local networks and hubs of training in 'principals of psychological information' (Hook, 2021), spreading knowledge throughout diversified communities within a given conflict context. Request that the growing cadre of humanitarian Training Officer positions engage in community meetings centered around best practices for 'nontangibles' in conflict transformation.





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[Oliver Fink](#) is a social scientist at the University of Basel formerly engaged with the University of Bern's Interfaculty Research Collaboration 'Religious Conflicts and Coping Strategies'. He is affiliated with [swisspeace](#) and the Herbert C. Kelman Institute for Interactive Conflict Transformation. His research focuses on intergroup conflict's psychological dimensions, specifically, how emotions contribute to collective action and conflict transformation approaches such as 'Track Two' mediation.

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## About this Brief

This [Policy Brief](#) presents empirical guidance on how peace mediators and practitioners could address emotional mechanisms to reduce [intergroup](#) violence. The Brief intends to broaden the understanding of group emotional processes of the conflict-affected population to increase the latitude and effectiveness of psychological conflict transformation interventions.

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