

Hamad, Ahmad, Azem, "The Reconceptualisation of Conflict Management", *Peace, Conflict and Development: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 7, July 2005, available from <http://www.peacestudiesjournal.org.uk>.

The Reconceptualisation of Conflict Management

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Abstract

This article argues that there has been increasing inaccuracy in defining the concept of "conflict management". The term has been given a far narrower meaning than it deserves. Historically, it has been understood to mean the containment or suspension of a conflict. The linguistic and conceptual meanings of "management" in disciplines such as "business management" are much wider than the conventional meaning of the term in conflict studies. Conflict management covers every action taken by the parties to the conflict to handle the situation. Therefore, the definition of the term should be extended to cover a whole discipline, which includes the initiation of a conflict, its escalation, the ensuing complications, containment, resolution and transformation as sub-topics.

Introduction

The end of the Cold War brought a new momentum to the study of conflict management. One of the main reasons for this was the proliferation of violent conflicts in regions such as Eastern Europe. The level of domestic ethnic conflicts, as well as of ethnic conflicts between communities and neighbouring states, attracted much interest among researchers.¹

The momentum stimulated the development of the theoretical framework of conflict studies and, in particular, the conceptual framework. Criticism has been

¹ According to David Garnham, some evidence suggests that the world has become more secure. He quotes statistics showing that since the last year of the Cold War, the number of major armed conflicts causing more than 1,000 fatalities has declined steadily from 36 in 1989 to 32 in 1991, 30 in 1995, 27 in 1996, and 25 in 1997. See, David Garnham, *Studies in International Conflict and Crisis Management* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Emirates Lectures Series, 25, 2000), p.1.

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growing regarding the methods used in handling conflict. Assertions have been made that many of the researchers and consultants who advise the decision-makers on handling conflict lack the background of theoretical and scientific methodology.

Several proposals have been made to devise new concepts and methods for studying conflict. I shall argue in this article that a large part of the problem with what is known as "conflict studies" stems not only from the lack of appropriate concepts, but also from the definition of some basic concepts in the field. Inaccuracy in defining concepts has led, in turn, to problems in the methodology of studying and handling conflict.

This study argues that there has been inaccuracy in defining the concept of conflict management. I believe that the concept has been given a far narrower meaning than it deserves. A more comprehensive definition would cover the study of the various dimensions of the conflict. Indeed, it could describe a whole discipline, in which conflict resolution, transformation and prevention, along with other handling patterns such as escalation, complication and initiation, would be sub-topics within the wider frame of conflict management. It would encompass understanding, containment, settlement, resolution, transformation, and other associated concepts and theories of conflict.

To present my argument, I have divided my research into four sections:

1. The conventional meaning of conflict management.
2. Criticism of the concept of conflict management.
3. Retrospection in the development of the concept.
4. Conclusion: reconceptualisation of conflict management.

1. The Conventional Meaning of Conflict Management

Conflict management, as a concept, has been conventionally associated with conflict containment. According to Hugh Miall, conflict management theorists "see violent conflicts as an ineradicable consequence of differences of values and interests within and between communities." These theorists regard "[r]esolving such conflicts as unrealistic: the best that can be done is to manage and contain them, and occasionally to reach a historic compromise in which violence may be laid aside and normal politics resumed."² This definition assumes that conflicts are irresolvable and that handling is limited to containing them and ending the violence.

However, other theorists believe that it is possible to eliminate conflicts. Therefore, they see conflict management as a stage in the handling of conflicts, which could be followed by later stages. For instance, John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary have divided what they call "ethnic conflict regulations" into two main sections: conflict management and conflict termination. This distinction is based on the idea that the former is concerned with the handling of the consequences of differences between adversaries, whereas the latter is concerned with terminating them.³

John Burton, in turn, distinguishes between "settlement of conflict" and "resolution of conflict". He defines a conflict as settled if the outcome entails a loss for one side and a gain for the other, or a compromise in which all or some of the parties are losers to some degree. An example is a situation where the parties are obliged to share a scarce resource so that none is completely satisfied. In some cases, this can be the

² Hugh Miall, "Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task", *Berghof Handbook of Conflict Transformation*, www.berghof-center.org.

³ John McGarry & Brendan O'Leary, *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.4.

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result of coercion.⁴ However, the conflict is resolved if the outcome fully meets the needs and interests of all the parties concerned. This situation occurs where the parties agree to exploit and share a resource in such a way as to completely satisfy everyone's values and interests.⁵

Peter Wallensteen emphasises the containment function of conflict management method and theory:

[Conflict management] typically focuses on the armed aspects of conflict: bringing the fighting to an end, limiting the spread of the conflict and, thus, containing it. ...conflict resolution is more ambitious, as it expects the parties to face jointly their incompatibility and find a way to live with or dissolve it.⁶

It could be concluded, therefore, that the main trend in conflict studies is to define conflict management as being on the same level as conflict settlement or containment. In other words, the general view of conflict management is that it is less advanced or that it covers a narrower range of treatment of conflict in comparison with other, more ambitious or advanced methods of dealing with this problem. Fisher et al. state that while they make "no claim" that there is a "universally accepted" typology for the methods used in addressing conflict, there are "consistent" terms, seen as "steps in a process. Each step taken includes the previous one." The authors classify these steps as conflict prevention, conflict settlement, conflict management, conflict resolution and conflict transformation. In their view, the definition of conflict management is that it "aims to limit and avoid future violence by promoting positive behavioural changes in the parties involved."⁷

⁴ John W. Burton, *Global Conflict: The Domestic Sources of International Crisis* (Brighton, Sussex, UK: Wheatsheaf Books, 1984), p.143.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Peter Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution: War, Peace and the Global System* (London; Thousand Oaks, CA; & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), p.53.

⁷ Simon Fisher et al., *Working with Conflict: Skills & Strategies for Action* (London: Zed Books, 2000), p.7.

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In line with the earlier interpretation, which is widely adopted, some scholars suggest that conflict resolution and transformation are phases in the treatment of conflict, which are more advanced than conflict management. In their view, conflict transformation can be used "to describe the field [of conflict studies] as a whole".⁸ The idea stems from their definition of conflict transformation as "address[ing] the wider social and political sources of a conflict and seek[ing] to transform the negative energy of war into positive social and political changes."⁹ This view is discussed in detail later in this article.

Meanwhile, it is important to present another trend in defining conflict management. There are scholars who use conflict management as an "umbrella term" to include methods such as conflict transformation,¹⁰ although they are almost apologetic in doing so. Reimann, for instance, acknowledges that the "logic" of conflict management is narrow:

*The term conflict management is itself rather unfortunate, as it may well include approaches such as conflict transformation that go far beyond the logic of management. However, in the lack of a better alternative, I will accept the use of conflict management as an umbrella term, while cautioning against its definitional and conceptual pitfalls.*¹¹

I agree with Reimann's use of the term conflict management as an umbrella concept, although not with her reservations and regret for using it because she has no alternative. Her view that conflict transformation has another logic when compared with conflict management is correct only according to the classical interpretation of the latter. That is the narrow meaning which confines conflict management to containment. Instead, it would be better if the umbrella of conflict management were extended to include conflict settlement, resolution and transformation, as well as other

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Cordula Reimann, "Assessing the State-of-the-Art in Conflict Management: Reflections from a Theoretical Perspective", in *Berghof Handbook*, p.1: http://www.berghof-handbook.net/articles/reimann_handbook.pdf.

¹¹ Ibid.

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stages such as conflict initiation and escalation, which are intended to prevent conflict resolution.

2. Criticism of the Concept of Conflict Management

The earlier view of conflict management clearly limits this concept to a certain level of handling conflicts, that is, containment. As a result, scholars have sought other concepts to express broader processes and other dimensions. Efforts to develop alternative and additional concepts embody explicit and implicit criticism of the conventional narrow meaning of conflict management. In fact, the trend involves suggesting new theories and perspectives for studying conflict. The earlier, narrow definition of conflict management reflects a whole theory. Consequently, an alternative concept forms a new theory. However, it has been subject to some criticism, of which the following points are the most important.

2.1 Exaggerated Realism

The conflict management theory assumes that conflicts are irresolvable, or at least very difficult to resolve or rarely resolved. Therefore, only containment and suspension of violence are possible and realistic. This attitude does not satisfy many researchers and such a pessimistic view is considered to be exaggerated.

2.2 Unrealistic

On the other hand, there are critics who hold the opposite view, namely, that conflict management theory is unrealistic,¹² because it assumes that conflicts can be contained and suspended. However, in many cases, it appears that "there are

¹² John Burton, *Conflict Resolution and Provention* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p.13.

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frustration and concerns under the surface", which can provoke a fresh eruption of conflict at any moment. These scholars think that containing conflict is not possible in the long term, and therefore other strategies are needed to deal with the problem.

2.3 *The Lack of Analysis*

There is a noticeable lack of analysis in works classified as conflict management research, theory and guides. Alan C. Tidwell expresses this view in his discussion of the concept of conflict resolution, a term that he uses to include conflict management.

The literature on conflict resolution focuses on "how to do it", with scant attention paid to situational and contextual issues. Yet, a more textured and mature approach to conflict resolution demands examination of these concepts and situations.¹³

Tidwell rightly notices that conflict resolution [and management] (as it is usually applied by scholars) is directed at the problem rather than at the person with whom one is in conflict.¹⁴ In justifying the need for a theory of conflict transformation, Miall says that it is necessary "if we are to have an adequate basis for the analysis of conflict."¹⁵

The lack of analysis has become largely structural in the theory and practice of conflict management. This situation has been caused mostly by the trend of interpreting conflict management as conflict settlement and containment. The focus is always on action and practical steps, usually in an atmosphere of crisis and urgency. Therefore, very little attention has been given to the analysis of the problem itself and the theoretical framework required to study it, as well as recognising and examining the consequences of the many recommended courses of action and types of settlement suggested by scholars or advisers.

¹³ Alan C. Tidwell, *Conflict Resolved? A Critical Assessment of Conflict Resolution* (London & New York: Pinter Publishers, 1998), p.2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Miall, "Conflict Transformation".

2.4 *The Problem of Integration*

The accusation of a lack of analysis is a severe criticism. Although there are practical examples to support this view, it is important to point out that in other cases there is a problem of separation. This means that an analysis can be made, and mostly on an empirical inductive basis, yet without connecting it to the methods of handling conflict and without a theoretical framework.

John Burton agrees that there is a lack of an adequate theoretical framework, and, even more serious, a lack of the realisation that it is necessary for dealing with basic problems such as a deep-rooted conflict.¹⁶ He thinks that the fault usually lies with specialists or experts in a particular field as a result of experience or training based on empirical data with little theoretical background.¹⁷

Marcelle E. DuPraw notices that "there has been insufficient integration between the body of theory and the intervention decisions practitioners are making in the field."¹⁸ DuPraw indicates "differences in organisational cultures of academic institutions and entrepreneurial practitioners"¹⁹ as being among the reasons for this situation. Moreover, it is possible to point to other reasons, such as working in an atmosphere of urgency to contain conflicts. Therefore, researchers and practitioners implicitly suggest that devoting time to theorising is not appropriate during times of tension and pressure. As a result, there is a separation between the "diagnosis" (the dimensions of the conflict, factors and context) and the "recipe" (settlement and resolution).

¹⁶ Burton, *Conflict Resolution*, p.25.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Marcelle E. DuPraw, "From Theory to Practice in Environmental Dispute Resolution: Negotiating the Transition", in Dennis J.D. Sandole & Hugo van der Merwe (eds), *Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice: Integration and Application* (Manchester, UK & New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), p.232.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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In some cases, although scholars do not lack the ability to theorise and to apply their theories to conflicts, for some reason (perhaps to make their work more readable and accessible), they choose not to use theory in their studies. A typical example is that of Ian Lustick, who wrote a long book theorising about certain dimensions of conflict.²⁰ I believe that this work is a significant example of the integration between theory and actual cases of conflict. It was published in 1993, and it contains what could be described as a pioneer theory for territorial conflicts. Seven years later, Lustick wrote an article about the problem of Jerusalem.²¹ Although he had referred to this topic in his earlier work, he adopted a very empirical analytical approach in the article, failing to apply his own theory, or any other theory to understanding the development of the case of Jerusalem.

The main justification for this omission could be that in the second work, Lustick was writing about an escalating issue. The Jerusalem question was dominating the newspaper headlines, and so he was writing in an atmosphere of urgency. Perhaps he also wanted to be "practical", so that the average reader would understand the problem and politicians might take an interest in the solution that he suggested.

Another interesting and explicit manifestation of the separation of conflict containment and its theoretical aspect is the apologetic language used in a co-authored book to invite readers to give attention to analysis. The authors point out that it is a requirement for the successful handling of a conflict:

As a reader of this book, you are probably keen to take action on the conflict you face. But the hard fact is that you can make things worse and take unnecessary risks if you do not take time to analyse the situation. We are not talking about a profoundly theoretical, near-perfect analysis that can only be achieved, if at all, in the shelter of a university or

²⁰ Ian Lustick, *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank–Gaza* (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 1993).

²¹ Ian Lustick, "Yerushalayim and al-Quds: Political Catechism and Political Realities", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol.30, no.1 (Autumn 2000), pp.5–21.

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other "ivory tower" of learning, but a substantial understanding of the situation and the issues – enough to enable you to decide what action to take.²²

In fact, the authors still think that the action of handling can start without analysis. They say: "Because the situation is urgent, you will do what you can and then analyse the impact of the action. You will go from analysis to action and back again."²³

3. The Concept of Conflict Management: Retrospection

I believe that the previous problems with and criticism of the theory of conflict management are connected with confining the concept of "management" to the containment and settlement of conflict. "Management" has a wider meaning than the strict sense of "to manage" or "to cope with". It includes the meaning of "to administer". This use is already common in other disciplines. We are all familiar with the concepts of business management and business administration. However, in a conflict, management is not used in the sense of administration, where the parties concerned can, in some cases, even seek conflict and block solutions.

It is a fact, as a business management scientist has noted, that "the word 'management' is a singularly difficult one." In his view, the word "'management' is American and can hardly be translated into another language, not even into British English."²⁴

Despite this assertion, he also states:

"'Management' is the specific organ of the new institution, whether business enterprise or university, hospital or armed services, research lab or government agency. If institutions are to function, managements must perform."²⁵

He considers the main tasks of management to be as follows: "The specific purpose and mission of the institution, whether business enterprise, hospital or

²² Simon Fisher et al., *Working with Conflict: Skills & Strategies for Action*, p.55.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Peter Drucker, *Management Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (New York: Harper Business, 1974), p.5.

²⁵ Ibid.

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university [is] making work productive [and] managing social impacts and social responsibilities."²⁶

The importance of discussing the word "management" and its meaning when it refers to an independent discipline is to show that it is generally considered to be more comprehensive than the current use of the term in conflict studies literature. It more or less means all of what managers do – or should do. When applied from the same perspective to conflicts, it should mean all of what is done by the actors or parties to the conflict, whether that is confrontation, settlement, escalation, or blocking solutions.

Below are four possible reasons why a narrow definition of conflict management was adopted in conflict studies. It is important to emphasise, however, that this is a discussion not of the history of the term, but of the factors on which its narrow meaning is based.

3.1 The utopian Nature of a Discipline in Its Early Stages

Research into conflict has suffered from a utopian view that has appeared in the many studies of conflict resolution. There are two main reasons for this situation. One is that many of the students and scholars who study conflict are aspiring activists motivated by religion and ideology. The other reason is the nature of sciences in general. A similar "utopianism" appeared during the early stages of several humanitarian sciences, of which an important example is international relations.

It is essential to distinguish between utopianism and ethical orientation, particularly in situations where personal principles and ideology can affect the conduct and objectivity of research.

²⁶ Ibid., p.40.

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An important group of researchers in this field have been religious and peace activists. Two outstanding examples are the Quakers and the Mennonites, who have played a leading role in advancing the discourse of conflict resolution. Among the known researchers is Kenneth Boulding, a Quaker who participated in the early movement of conflict resolution and was largely responsible for publishing the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.²⁷ Boulding, for instance, used in his theories the factor of the power of "love". He thought that respect and legitimacy could be included in the factors affecting power relations.²⁸ An assumption of this kind is rare in disciplines such as international relations. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that Boulding's theory contains clear, realist views. In addition, he is correct in believing that it is impossible to ignore completely the emotional and humanitarian aspects of political and conflict relations. Boulding analyses the impact of the balance of the political and conflict relations on any particular conflict.²⁹ His analysis clearly applies some of the principles of the realist school of thought in politics and international relations.

There are other examples of the idealist handling of conflicts, such as authors who, as some scholars have noted, clearly "advocate non-violence on moral or religious grounds."³⁰ Some of these authors have adopted the ideas of famous political leaders and ideologists, for instance, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr, A.J. Muste and Leo Tolstoy.³¹ Robert Holmes is a scholar who believes in factors such as "non-resistance", and "moral resistance", his views clearly being based on religion. He

²⁷ Tidwell, *Conflict Resolved?*, p.14.

²⁸ Paul Wehr, Heidi Burgess & Guy Burgess (eds), *Justice without Violence* (Boulder, CO; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), pp. 12–13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.10–12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

³¹ *Ibid.*

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himself declares that he has been "challenged from many angles... [with] the exception of the 'peace churches' (Quakers, Brethren and Mennonites)."³²

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the role of religion or ethics in analysis or human and political relations. However, I argue that in some cases, religious and ethical values can influence scholars to draw the conclusions that they wish to draw, rather than to study phenomena as they are in reality. Some scholars, who have committed themselves to missions such as "the defense of freedom, democracy, and the reduction of political violence through the use of nonviolent action,"³³ move closer to behaving as activists rather than researchers, for their efforts appear to be based on personal emotions. John Lederach, Professor of International Peacebuilding and a scholar at Eastern Mennonite University, describes his experience of two decades of participation in many peace processes. He shows how scholars can be anxious to reach solutions and agreements, which can affect their understanding of the conflict that they are studying. (Lederach's observations are examined in detail later in this article.) Scholars' participation in mediation and workshops with the aim of solving conflicts is a good example of how they abandon their original position of students and researchers.

Scholars who study conflict are familiar with the term "problem-solving workshops". This practice or movement was pioneered by John Burton. A workshop lasting four or five days is organised as a tool for resolving a conflict. A limited number of delegations represent the parties to the conflict, while a third-party team of

³² Robert L. Holmes, "How Can War be Christian?", *Christianity Today* (20 March 2003).

³³ See the mission statement of the Albert Einstein Institution, at www.aeinstein.org

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facilitators help to promote a dialogue between delegations that may have refused in the past to hold any direct communication or negotiation.³⁴

It is argued that the workshops where scholars play the role of the third party help to build theories. According to this point of view, "such exercises might be used to develop theories about conflict and its resolution."³⁵ These workshops, under the aegis of the Centre for the Analysis of Conflict, University College London, have been known not to neglect the analysis of the problems as a major part of conflict resolution.³⁶

The experiment of problem-solving workshops cannot be evaluated in detail here. However, the practice of holding workshops to resolve conflicts is not confined to the movements discussed above. They are used elsewhere, facilitated by various researchers and academics. It can be stated that in many cases, while scholars play the role of a third party, they tend to concentrate on action at the expense of the theoretical and scientific requirements. Because scholars are the mediators or advisers to the parties to the conflict, they are often working under pressure, so they confine their efforts to finding solutions and ways of minimising tension. Therefore, they do not apply the necessary theoretical provisions, which results in minimum attention being devoted to analysis. Unfortunately, as a result of these factors, conflict management is incorrectly interpreted as conflict containment. This approach does not allow for the adequate study of the context and dynamics of the conflict or for the sound theoretical scientific interpretation of the empirical and historical data.

³⁴ Joseph V. Montville, "The Healing Function in Political Conflict Resolution", in Sandole & van der Merwe (eds), *Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice*, p.114.

³⁵ Christopher R. Mitchell, "Problem-solving Exercises and Theories of Conflict Resolution", in Sandole & van der Merwe (eds), *Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice*, p.78.

³⁶ Tidwell, *Conflict Resolved?*, p.14.

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John Lederach's experience of two decades of handling conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Basque country, Latin America and elsewhere illustrates the methods that scholars apply to negotiation and mediation. He has observed the emotional and personal nature of the scholars' actions, as well as their anxiety and awareness of the emergency, which increases the pressure to reach a breakthrough:

Time and again, in situations as varied as Northern Ireland, the Basque Country or the negotiations between the Philippine government and the communist insurgency, the moments when I thought there was the greatest potential for a significant move forward have been stagnant and even counterproductive. For the practitioner these time periods create an emotional roller coaster. The predictive view suggests significant change is near. Then just when hopes are high everything collapses, leading to a deep sense of despair and often urgent, at times inappropriate, responses to save the moment.³⁷

Lederach's observations reflect how far practitioners are from scientific analysis and theoretical provision when they engage in mediation. He notes that:

the first commonly held belief is that mediation lies primarily in the person, and often the personality of the mediator-as-the-actor rather than mediation-as-process with multiple roles, functions and activities carried out by a wide array of people.³⁸

Lederach suggests that scholars should stop trying to be "harvesters" and become "cultivators" instead. He compares the attitude of some scholars in seeking quick solutions to "growing a garden with no understanding of seeds, soils and sweat." He calls upon these scholars to abandon this practice and turn to fostering and sustaining "committed, authentic relationships across the lines of conflict over time." Lederach concludes that the work of peacebuilders should not "rise and fall with the temporal ups and downs of the conflict cycles."³⁹

Some scholars handling conflict, such as the trend of peace studies, which "explore handling of conflict by peaceful means", state clearly that their aim is to train "workers", not researchers. According to Johan Galtung:

³⁷ John Darby & Roger MacGinty (eds), *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.37.

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Peace studies train mediators for conflict resolution and transformation and conciliators for reconciliation. There is an enormous demand for such peace workers, more than of peace researchers, and much amateurishness and denial that there may be something to study and learn before leaping into practice.⁴⁰

It is important to note that there is nothing new in the debate about the relationship between the method of understanding problems and finding solutions to them. There was a similar debate during the early stages of the discipline of international relations. Indeed, the influence of personal ethical orientation and principles on the objectivity of research was observed to be widespread during the introductory phase of humanitarian disciplines in general. There is a clear similarity between the ideal and liberal view, which dominated international relations in its infancy at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the situation of conflict studies during the early years of the twenty-first century.

In his famous book, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, Edward Carr wrote in the 1940s: "It is the purpose of promoting health which creates medical science, and the purpose of building bridges which creates the sciences of engineering." Carr was comparing the physical and the humanitarian sciences. He stated that the laboratory worker investigating the causes of cancer might have been originally inspired by the aim of eradicating the disease. Nevertheless, the aim is irrelevant to the investigation and separable from it. According to Carr, the laboratory worker's conclusion can be nothing more than a factual report. In the political sciences, however, the investigator is inspired by the desire to cure some of the ills of the body politic. Among the causes of the trouble, he discovers that human beings normally react to certain conditions in a certain way:

⁴⁰ Johan Galtung, "Peace Studies: A Ten Points Primer". Paper presented at the conference on "Peace Studies in China", held at Nanjing University, 4–6 March 2005: www.transcend.org/t_database/printarticle.php?id=536.

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This is not a fact comparable to the fact that human bodies react in a certain way to a certain drug. It is a fact which may be changed by the desire to change it; and this desire, already present in the mind of the investigator, may be extended, as the result of his investigation, to a sufficient number of other human beings to make it effective.⁴¹

This kind of situation can arise in studies of conflict. Owing to a particular desire or need, researchers can either misunderstand or misrepresent facts. Politicians or their advisers will do this to justify their actions, to give an excuse for their defeat, or to mobilise their party. Researchers do this in certain cases, including their wish to see a less complex and less difficult conflict. If they mediate and act as a third party, then perhaps ignoring some aspects of the problem functions as a way to minimise the stalemate that they face.

Carr observed that utopianism was a characteristic of the early stages of a new discipline or field of study:

It is not surprising to find that when the human mind begins to exercise itself in some fresh field, an initial stage occurs in which the element of wish or purpose is overwhelmingly strong, and the inclination to analyse facts and means weak or non-existent.⁴²

As mentioned above, the word "management" in other disciplines, such as that of business management, refers to a wide variety of tasks performed by those in charge to achieve the goals of the institution, of which settling conflicts can be only a small part. However, this is not true of the definition of conflict management, although it is a different story in practice. Politicians and leaders direct operations to achieve their own goals or those of their parties and institutions, using means in which conflict can be a tool in the process. However, in the literature of conflict theory, this process has not gained the definition of "management", because that word has already been used to refer to the activities of a third party. It refers to the activities of the parties to the

⁴¹ Edward Hallet Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1946), pp.3–4.

⁴² Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p.5.

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conflict only when it includes settling conflicts and disputes, though not achieving group goals by conflict.

3.2 The Cold War Trend

A large proportion of the conceptual problems in conflict theory are contextual. The context of theorisation affects the construction of theories and their generalisations. I believe that the idea of "containment" as a goal for conflict management is connected with the politics of the Cold War. During the Cold War era, it was important to prevent conflicts and disputes between the allies of the superpowers from going beyond a certain point and thus erupting into open and violent direct confrontation between the superpowers themselves. Therefore, it became the common practice in many parts of the world to preserve the *status quo* by containing conflicts and disputes, but not resolving them.

The Arab–Israeli conflict in the Middle East is one example where no solution has been achieved. Moreover, on several occasions, it has appeared that the superpowers applied pressure on their allies not to renew the violence, or to limit the warfare to a certain level. One of these occasions was the war of June 1967, when the Soviet Union tried to convince Egypt that it would not face an Israeli attack, so there was no need for escalation. Meanwhile, the United States applied pressure on Israel not to attack the Syrian and Jordanian fronts. However, the development of the war in the field limited the influence of the superpowers over their allies, especially when it became clear that the Soviet Union would not invade the region to prevent Israeli expansion. So, the pressure from the American Administration lessened and

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international open confrontation became less likely.⁴³ It can be concluded that "[d]uring the Cold War the superpowers were neither willing to sacrifice their clients nor defend them to the hilt, but the extent of their support was in large measure dependent on the context."⁴⁴

The interpretation of conflict management as "containment" during the Cold War was not confined to the levels of conflict among the allies of the superpowers. Doctrines were also created to "organise" the relationship between the two superpowers. The idea of containment as the main goal of conflict management was connected to the doctrines of *détente*, deterrence and, to a lesser degree, the containment doctrine itself. The basis of these doctrines was the continuation of the conflict between the capitalist West and the socialist East, though at the same time avoiding open confrontation.

The doctrine of containment began in the aftermath of the Second World War, which created a climate of "uncertainty and debate over how the United States should conduct relations with the Soviet Union."⁴⁵ The basis of the doctrine is the supposition that if the Soviet Union were geographically "contained" (by preventing new countries from joining the Communist Bloc), "it would undergo gradual internal changes that might transform its status from revolutionary state to more moderate great power."⁴⁶ This approach concentrated on avoiding confrontation and seeking long-term solutions.

From the perspective of containment, the doctrine of *détente* is more closely connected to the definition of conflict management. It was used to reduce tension

⁴³ For the details of the American and Soviet positions in this war, see Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴⁴ Steven L Spiegel, *Conflict Management in the Middle East* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1992), p.xiii.

⁴⁵ Martin Griffiths, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), p.22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

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between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War of the 1960s and 1970s by such means as arms control.⁴⁷

Deterrence was another method of managing the Cold War conflict. Again, conflict and dispute were allowed to continue, but open, large-scale confrontation was avoided. Deterrence is based on controlling the behaviour of other actors by the use of threats:

"The deterrer tries to convince the deterree that the costs of undertaking the action that the deterrer wishes to prevent will be substantially higher than any gain that the deterree might anticipate making from the action."⁴⁸

In many cases, politicians repeat assertions of their interest in mediating, facilitating and sponsoring peace processes around the world, whereas in reality, they are supporting one or more parties to the conflict. In other words, although directly involved in the conflict, the language that they present supports their assumed role of third-party interest in conflict containment and settlement. These cases are clearly not confined to the Cold War era. The term "conflict management" is apparently used to mean peacekeeping or restoration, whereas in fact it refers to a policy of aggression or defence in the name of collective security. "Collective conflict management" is defined in international relations as "any systematic effort to prevent, suppress, or reverse breaches of the peace."⁴⁹ At the same time, however, it is criticised as an agreement between powerful governments, who benefit from the existing balance of power, to prevent the emergence of any new global or regional power as a competitor.

⁴⁷ Iain McLean, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics* (Oxford, UK & New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.136.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Joseph Lepgold & Thomas G. Weiss (eds), *Collective Conflict Management and Changing World Politics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p.5.

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As Carr expressed it in the 1940s: "The common interest in peace masks the fact that some nations desire to maintain the *status quo*."⁵⁰

In conclusion, the Cold War era saw situations where the great powers sought to handle conflicts by accepting a certain *status quo*. In the view of these governments, conflict management meant preventing widespread violence, though not necessarily resolving the conflicts. Moreover, preserving the *status quo* that serves the interests of certain governments by declaring a concern for peace and non-violent means of solving problems is common practice in the world of politics. The fact is that the end of the Cold War era also meant the end of many *status quo* situations, resulting in the eruption of violent ethnic conflict in the Balkans and elsewhere. This helped to partly weaken the conventional interpretation of conflict management as conflict containment without dealing with the cause of the problems.

3.3 The Problems of Inductive Methodologies

Although this article cannot discuss in detail the quality of interdisciplinary or inductive methodologies, it is important to mention them in relation to the topic of the research.

Interdisciplinary methodology is an approach that has been adopted to provide a comprehensive view by using different fields of science with the aim of benefiting from their theoretical provisions. It should enhance the theoretical underpinning of research and therefore support deductive studies. However, interdisciplinary methodology, in practice, could be used as a pretext for undisciplined research. This is

⁵⁰ Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p.53.

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especially true when using inductive methodology.⁵¹ Students concentrate on collecting empirical data at the expense of building a theoretical framework. This leads to selectivity in treatment and can produce biased studies of phenomena. Reimann noticed that "despite or perhaps even due to, its innate multidisciplinary nature, the overall field of conflict management is fraught with conceptual and definitional imprecision."⁵²

The problem of inductive research in the study of conflict management has become apparent to some researchers. Reimann describes it as follows:

"A glance through the conflict management literature unfortunately suggests that most conflict management approaches or strategies are not based on such a broad or explicit theoretical concept of conflict."⁵³

She concludes that "most conflict management research seems empirically to approach and work with the understanding of theory."⁵⁴ Reimann has clearly observed that what are supposed to be interdisciplinary studies, sometimes means, in actual practice, ignoring theory:

"Usually, the interpretation of theory evident in the field of conflict management is limited to some sort of explanations of observable or personal experience, viewed in terms of casual logic with ensuing policy recommendations."⁵⁵

For the purposes of this article, it is important to re-emphasise that inductive methods – with scant use of theory – have contributed to the superficial treatment of conflict by concentrating on its violent symptoms and their containment instead of probing more deeply into its causes.

⁵¹ From my experience of Middle Eastern Studies, I have noted that studies of this kind, which are supposed to be contained in interdisciplinary departments, usually tend towards inductive methodology, for they depend on narration, data collection and information, with very little use of general scientific theory.

⁵² Reimann, *Assessing the State-of-the-Art in Conflict Management*, p.2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

3.4 Organisation Theory

One important area where there is a growing trend in interpreting conflict management as containment and settlement is in organisations. Here employers and managers or leaders are concerned with positive "constructive" relations with employees, and among employees or members. Thus, conflict management could be synonymous with conflict containment and resolution. However, the view that conflict management means handling and containing conflict, instead of resolving it, has also gained an important momentum. In the 1920s, Mary Parker Follett was considered "a pioneer of the view that conflict had a positive place in organisations." She believed that conflicts resulted from limited thinking, and that the only way to manage them was by compromise. Therefore, a compromise meant that "no party got what they wanted, rather only a portion of what they originally sought."⁵⁶ Lawyers and other practitioners dealing with conflicts within economic institutions are usually concerned with settlements and halfway solutions, instead of understanding the dimensions of the conflict. This approach could function in some areas, but not in others, such as in ethnic, political and international relations.

An examination of the practitioners who call themselves specialists in "conflict management" reveals that this field is increasingly regarded as one of skill learning and training. It is part of a rapidly growing industry of training that produces most of the management and behavioural fads. Courses are offered to companies, institutions and individuals to increase productivity, and to reduce tension and misunderstanding in the family, the neighbourhood, society, institutions and companies.

⁵⁶ Tidwell, *Conflict Resolved?*, pp.10–11.

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Tidwell notes that a "major source of interest in conflict handling has come from a number of popular texts on the subject of conflict."⁵⁷ He mentions several examples of books with titles such as *Getting to Yes* and *Beyond Machiavelli*. According to Tidwell, these books have contributed to the public understanding of conflict handling. His view is that they "trivialize conflict, routine methods of handling conflict, and undervalue the role that situation and context play in handling conflict."⁵⁸ These books do not consider the depth of the psychological dimension of the conflict, nor the complexity of its associated interests, especially at group and international levels. The attitude that adversaries are necessarily interested in containing or ending conflict is dominant in these books. Ideas such as the desirability of a win-win situation seem to be exaggerated.

The flourishing industry in guides and training courses is based on the provision of brief recipes and manuals for dealing with certain situations. This has led to the development of a trend in avoiding the need for an adequate diagnosis of the elements and context of each conflict. As a result, it is not surprising that the concept of conflict management concentrates on treatment or "what to do" at the expense of the necessary diagnosis.

4. Conclusion: Reconceptualisation of Conflict Management

Scholars recognise the limitations of the concept of conflict management. Several new concepts have been suggested to fill the gap in its theory. A prominent example is that of conflict transformation. This concept, as defined earlier, recognises the lack of analysis in the traditional approaches to conflict management and conflict resolution. The aim of conflict transformation is to include "engagement" in transforming

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.24.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.25.

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relationships, interests, discourses and the society or parties to the conflict themselves.⁵⁹ The concept concentrates on the importance and factors of conflict transformation in the context of "ending violent conflicts". It is based on the fact that conflict is a dynamic phenomenon and that its resolution requires "a series of necessary transformations in the elements which would otherwise sustain ongoing violence and war."⁶⁰

However, the concept still asserts the "engagement" of researchers and practitioners in the process. In other words, it is largely confined to the context of conflict resolution, although conflict transformation in reality can also exist in other contexts, such as escalation. The parties to a conflict transform it by directing it. The transformation of a conflict is a common practice by politicians to escalate the problem and prevent its solution.

Another example is the invention of the term "provention". John Burton describes this solution as "conflict provention", that is, deducing from an adequate explanation of the phenomenon of conflict. It includes the structural changes required to remove the conflict and to create the co-operative relationship.⁶¹ Provention treats the conditions that create conflict. The main difference between transformation and provention is that the latter includes "doing something about conflicts before they cause problems."⁶² The concept gives attention to the analysis and predictions of the causes of conflict. However, it still regards conflict in terms of prevention and solution.

⁵⁹ Miall, "Conflict Transformation".

⁶⁰ Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham & Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention of Deadly Conflicts* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001), p.156.

⁶¹ Burton, *Conflict Resolution and Provention*, p.3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.233.

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The reconceptualisation of conflict management could include both types of transformation, that is, solution and escalation, and in this way, it would cover a whole field. The diagnosis would be both common to and separate from each theory, such as settlement, solution, transformation and prevention. All of these methods would require a more thorough analysis. At the same time, the analysis and diagnosis must be made separately, whichever kind of treatment "theory" is used to tackle the conflict.

The diagnosis of ills is essential and it must be unified and objective. The treatment might be varied and further investigation might be required. Concepts such as transformation and prevention propose techniques for better understanding and handling of conflicts. The development of the discipline or field of conflict management needs to include studying conflicts as they are, on any level or at any stage. This should be done separately from their settlement, resolution and prevention, and only for the purpose of further understanding and analysis.

Nevertheless, transformation and prevention require a more careful analysis, which is largely lacking in the conventional approaches to conflict management and conflict resolution, although they still represent treatment. My main thesis in this article is that conflict management is not confined to solving, suspending and terminating conflicts. Rather, it is part of every tactic or step adopted by the parties to the conflict or a third party.

I conclude my thesis with the following points:

1. **Conflict management as a term** includes many phenomena besides the settlement of disputes and the solving of problems. Its conventional narrow meaning should be replaced with a broader reference to processes such as containment,

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escalation, settlement, resolution, transformation, prevention, creation of conflicts, prevention of solutions, etc.

2. **Conflict management as a discipline** could be seen as a complete field of study encompassing other theories and approaches such as conflict settlement, (containment), conflict resolution, transformation, etc. Conflict management is the "umbrella name" of the whole discipline dealing with conflict, its causes, symptoms, dynamics and solutions. It is a single field including description, understanding, prediction, and participation in part or comprehensive, interim or permanent solutions.

3. **Conflict management as an approach**

(a) should return to the original nature of science, where the understanding of phenomena is based on studying them in reality, and where the stage of study and understanding is not mixed with the stage of treatment. Ethical and personal motivation should not affect the objectivity of understanding and description. Researchers should remain researchers, and not try to be activists at the same time. Scientists might have to cease acting as both mediators and practitioners, especially when these activities influence their role of researchers. A similar example is the manufacture of biological weapons. Despite their immoral nature, they are studied as part of biology or medicine. Therefore, the study of conflict, with its complexity and the tactics used to complicate it further, must be given the same level of importance as the study of peaceful methods to solve it.

(b) **Deductive methodology**, in conflict studies is highly recommended, because theory can help to remove the distortion created by anecdotal and selective approaches.

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