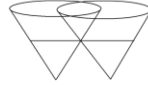


# PERSPECTIVISM



We enhance our understanding of conflict not only by studying different conflict theories, but by appreciating that theories themselves are embedded in particular perspectives or ways of approaching research and thought. In turn, the perspectives (approaches) we hold or use reflect their own sets of underlying values and beliefs, often called world-views. Below are key terms to help organize how we can approach the study of conflict.

## Theory

A specific explanation of the relationship between variables that are deemed important to explain an event or phenomenon. For example, there are theories about the relationship between conflict style and gender, and between aggression and physiological excitation, among others. Theories are not right or wrong --- Rather, they are more or less *useful*. Good theories promote understanding by supporting *description* and even *prediction*. Generally, conflict theories describe and/or explain such phenomena as:

- The nature of conflict
- The nature of conflict resolution
- Escalation
- De-escalation
- The role of a third-party intervener

## Perspective

Theories do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they reflect particular perspectives. A perspective is an approach or “lens” for viewing any given phenomenon. “A perspective colors one’s world, guiding the search for answers, determining what questions are worth asking, what data are worth collecting.” (Folger, Poole & Stutman, Working through Conflict, 3d ed., 1997, p. 40). There are many perspectives on the phenomenon of *conflict*. **Examples:** *I look at each person’s individual needs to determine why they are so adamant about their position; or, I look at the ways in which people interact with one another to understand their conflict; or, I look at the social context in which the person lives to understand their situation.*

## Worldview

Perspectives are built on and reflect particular beliefs or world views. A world view is a socially shared, value-based, group-related set of assumptions, at a fundamental, taken-for-granted level, about how the world works: e.g., the nature of reality, the nature of human beings, the nature of social interaction, what is “good” and “bad,” human motivation, etc. One’s worldview is often invisible. This is also called a world-picture or ideology. **Examples:** *I believe that there exists an absolute truth in the world that can be discovered or known; or, I believe that the only truth is that which we choose to believe; or I believe that power unavoidably corrupts; or I believe that preservation of society (as we know it) is paramount.*

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# **A Range of Conflict Punctuation Marks**

*Potential objectives, purposes for, or consequences of, responding to conflict:*

## **CONFLICT ESCALATION**

A marked (and often sequential) expansion in the scope or magnitude of a conflict or conflict interaction. Often applied to social conflict in reference to increases in the severity of coercion actors use or the scope of participation in the conflict.

## **CONFLICT REDUCTION**

A marked reduction in the scope or magnitude of a conflict or conflict interaction. May be as the result of internal or external pressure, conscious settlement of issues in dispute, or the result of improved quality of interaction.

## **CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

Containment or control of the overt manifestations of conflict through individual or institutional mechanisms without necessarily addressing the deeper causes and relations out of which the conflict arises. May focus on preventing or resolving disputes. Also used as a generic term for all forms of conflict response.

## **CONFLICT SETTLEMENT**

Ending a dispute by agreeing to terms (often about future behavior) that do not fundamentally alter the sources or relations that underlying the conflict.

## **CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Elimination of the source(s) underlying the conflict (often seen as incompatibility of interests), thereby solving the problem between the parties. Also used as a generic term for all forms of conflict response.

## **CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION**

A constructive change in the way(s) parties to a conflict understand themselves and each other, promoting growth and a different quality of interaction. Transformation can also relate to a change in the way(s) parties to a conflict understand and relate to the themes, topics, issues, rules and/or structures around which the conflict interaction occurs.

## **RECONCILIATION**

Often associated with restorative justice practices, “reconciliation” refers to a renewal or restoration of a torn or damaged relationship. One metaphor to describe reconciliation is a process that reweaves the torn fabric of a community. While reconciliation is one form of transformation, the opposite is not necessarily true – transformation does not necessarily lead to, or presuppose, reconciliation. Similarly, reconciliation - and for that matter, transformation - may, but does not necessarily, also involve forgiveness.