

Special Thematic Section on "Multiple Perspectives in Conflict Settings: From Diversity to Pluralism"

Multiple Perspectives in Conflict Settings: An Introduction

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Abstract

In this introduction to the special thematic section, we discuss the pre-eminent research orientation in the social and political psychology of peace and conflict, its current critiques, and what more multiple perspectives can add to the field. First, we outline key characteristics of the 'simple road' to conflict settings: a simple, often binary, definition of the sides involved, a focus on one conflict-induced negative outcome and on one causal pathway leading to it, and a motivation to derive policy recommendations from empirical findings. Second, we discuss constructivist, normative, ecological, and pragmatic critiques of the 'simple road', as four distinct strands grounded in different epistemological assumptions, but converging on the account that research priorities need to be revised and methodologies be expanded. Third, engaging with the fundamental questions raised by the critiques, we make a plea for more multiple perspectives: for multiple voices among research participants (more diversified samples), for multiple positions from where to listen to these voices (more time-points and multi-factorial approaches), and for multiple sensors with which to capture them (more mixed methods). We highlight how the different contributions to the section provide creative developments along one or several of the three axes. On the basis of the concrete inspiring examples they provide, we argue that a field growing along these axes would increase its capacity to bridge its most important critical developments and to expand its scope in relevant directions.

Keywords: peace and conflict studies, parsimonious research designs, complexity, multiple perspectives, diversified samples, holistic approaches, mixed methods

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The Simple Road to Conflict Settings

Parsimonious research strategies are a long cherished ideal in (political and) social psychology. When designing the discipline's most famous experiment, [Milgram \(1974, p. 13\)](#) commended the merits of a simple road to inquire psychological phenomena:

“Simplicity is the key to effective scientific inquiry. This is especially true in the case of subject matter with a psychological content. Psychological matter, by its nature, is difficult to get at and likely to have many more sides to it than appear at first glance. Complicated procedures only get in the way of clear scrutiny of the phenomenon itself.”

Undeniably, Milgram's experiment has shaped social psychologists' understanding of how ordinary people react to cruel orders. But his methodological maxim might have had an even more momentous impact on the field. [Vollhardt and Bilali \(2008\)](#) have conducted a systematic review of the literature published in core journals (see also [Vollhardt & Cohrs, 2013](#), for an update). Their review has revealed that social psychological studies of peace and conflict are designed in their overwhelming majority to explain intergroup attitudes, stereotypes or prejudice in Western societies, and that they typically rely on either experimental or self-reported data from university students. Interestingly, this focus on research sites, participants and phenomena that can be accessed conveniently from where the field's mainstream is produced, coexists with an expressed moral claim and a widespread desire to conduct socially impactful research:

“Without exception, the values of mitigating and preventing direct and structural violence or promoting intergroup cooperation were implied or explicitly stated in all articles. Usually these values were expressed in the introduction or discussion section of the articles, for example, framing the question in terms of a societal problem that needs to be solved or suggesting policy implications of research findings.” ([Vollhardt & Bilali, 2008, p. 18](#))

Half a century after Milgram's seminal work, psychologically oriented conflict researchers appear still attracted by the prospect to study the most difficult questions of their time – in Milgram's case, it was the moral legacy of fascism – with the simplest possible strategies of inquiry. In the meantime, the simple road has firmly established itself as research praxis. It has become a consistent scholarly routine, which has generated the field's fundamental insights but which, as we are going to see, has also been criticized for being yet insufficient to account for complex conflict dynamics across diverse conflict settings.

To be more specific, when referring to the 'simple road', we mean a research process in which four steps play a characteristic role. They can be schematically outlined as follows: The first characteristic step consists in the identification of a conflictual intergroup setting, in terms of a clear and *simple definition of the sides* involved. At this stage, the requirements of a parsimonious analysis are often best met by structuring it along one overarching binary opposition that subsumes a wide range of conflict-generated experiences and is of immediate intuitive appeal as a descriptor of the conflict's main fault line ([Kerr, Durrheim, & Dixon, 2017](#)), such as 'Israeli Jews vs Palestinians', 'Singhalese vs Tamils', or 'Serbs vs Croats'. The second characteristic element consists then in the *identification of a conflict-induced 'bad'* within the setting. As highlighted by Vollhardt and Bilali, at this step the focus of the methodological lens orients more typically to what people feel or think of each other as group members, than to what they actually do to each other. Their 'prejudices', broadly defined ([Paluck & Green, 2009](#)), become the first source of concern and the prime phenomena to be explained. A third step consists in *abstracting one*

causal process producing the ‘bad’, prone to empirical analysis. The longstanding and burgeoning literature on intergroup contact – or lack thereof – as a causal factor affecting prejudice provides an eminent and, as meta-analytic evidence shows, conclusive example: it is well sustained that ‘not enough’ intergroup contact conduces to ‘too much’ intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; see also Pettigrew et al., 2011). A fourth important element is added across a wide spectrum of work using the ‘simple road’: a *policy recommendation* to reduce the factor identified as cause in the studied process. Once research has successfully documented a causal path leading to the negative outcome, this final step involves a call to change social conditions (or to create specific conditions), where the compass is redirected in a favourable direction via the identified pathway.

Given the scientific success-story of contact research it is not surprising that scholars from this subfield have developed particular confidence in its accumulated wisdom and in the virtues of the applied tools derived from it. According to Hewstone et al. (2006), the “contact hypothesis (...) has contributed greatly to the fact that psychology is now in its best position ever to make a contribution to the advancement of world peace by actively promoting intergroup tolerance” (p. 100; see also Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013). In some conflict settings, the success of the contact paradigm has inspired a veritable industry of interventions, aiming to spread and further sustain the beneficial effects anticipated by the theory. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular has been transformed this way into a permanent real world laboratory – according to Maoz (2011), “since the mid-1980’s dozens of encounter programs between Israeli Jews and Palestinians have been conducted each year” and “about 16% of the Jewish-Israeli population have participated in at least one programme of planned encounter between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel in their lifetime” (p. 116).

There are good reasons why the ‘simple road’ to conflict settings has established itself as the preeminent approach in the field. It displays a remarkable capacity to accommodate potentially contradictory expectations. On the one hand, the simple road is consistent with the discipline’s main epistemological canons, as it allows to investigate specific pathways in controlled settings and, hence, to make authoritative causal statements. On the other hand, it fits with prevailing ideals of scientific productivity, as it allows for a steady flow of findings and publications, while working with high cost-effectiveness and limiting the risks inherent to the logistic, ethical and epistemological perils of research in volatile conflict zones or with hard-to-access communities (Barakat et al., 2002; Wood, 2006). Furthermore, the simple road meets broader public expectations that scientific research should be policy-relevant, impactful and morally engaged: there is indeed much enthusiasm in the field to derive normative signposts for practical interventions and real-world policies from empirical conclusions.

Altogether, it almost looks as if social psychologists have managed to square the circle in the field of peace and conflict studies. This first impression needs to be balanced though with a lucid appraisal of the price to pay when the simple road becomes a *single* road to conflict settings.

Squaring the Circle?

Over the last two decades, the different components of the ‘simple road’ have been met with increasing dissatisfaction and scepticism from within the field. Critics have become more vocal, more systematic, but also more diverse with regard to their respective epistemological standpoints. Currently, each of the ‘four steps’ outlined above can be matched with a specific school of thought that has problematized its underlying assumptions and called for alternative research practices.

First of all, a *constructivist critique* has problematized the routine practice of treating the groups involved in a conflict setting as given and fixed, rather than analysing the production of social categories as a critical aspect of the conflict dynamic in itself. In this perspective, defining sides in a conflict creates a basis for conflict actors to claim moral legitimacy for their side, build alliances, and influence the balance of forces to their advantage (Herrera & Reicher, 1998; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Definitions of sides are therefore rarely uncontroversial. Building a conflict analysis on a single definition potentially obscures what it entails to define the conflict in that particular way, and which alternative definitions would have been available (Uluğ & Cohrs, 2019; Uluğ, Odağ, Holtz, & Cohrs, 2017). What is more, definitions of sides can shift as a conflict unfolds (Stevenson, Condor, & Abell, 2007) and sometimes the conflict itself produces new forms of actors and social categories such as, for example, emergent survivor communities (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2009). Finally, defining groups in binaries is particularly problematic when it brackets out the role of powerful third actors and their influence on intergroup relations, notably in the case of (post-)colonial divide and rule policies (Kerr, Durrheim, & Dixon, 2017).

As a specific outgrowth of this approach, a *normative critique* of the way ‘bads’ are routinely identified in conflict settings has developed. Dixon, Levine, Reicher, and Durrheim (2012) have raised the question of whether situations of social oppression can always be identified with a problem of prejudice, and whether reducing prejudice in conflict settings is necessarily a morally desirable outcome. This approach explicitly acknowledges that there can be different types of ‘goods’, that the realisation of different goods can enter into competition in a conflict setting, and that prioritizing one good over another is ultimately a question of moral judgement and political ideology. The critique is rooted in empirical work showing that the same conditions that produce action motives towards social harmony can hamper action motives towards social justice: increased contact among unequals in asymmetric conflict settings can lead to less support to equality-enhancing actions at the same time as it leads to less prejudice (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2007; Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). There is often no self-evident way to judge whether such outcomes are good news or bad news, but the trade-off is bound to be more pronounced for the most disadvantaged. Ignoring the trade-off therefore positions the researchers (unwittingly) on the side of the happy few whose collective self-interests are best served by a combination of social harmony and social injustice.

Another type of critiques have problematized the assumption that complex societal processes can be conveniently decomposed into separate micro-level causal relationships – or, more precisely, that the identification of a micro-causal process would enable to infer societal-level outcomes. This *ecological critique* comes in different guises. A particularly sophisticated approach draws upon complexity science to model multiple factors intervening in a conflict setting as a dynamical system (Vallacher et al., 2012). The key characteristic of such a system is that different factors do not simply cumulate their respective impacts in a linear equation. Multiple factors rather combine into specific configurations of forces, which can take the form of stable equilibrium states, such as sustainable peace or intractable conflict (Coleman et al., 2007). To recap with the previous example, a dynamical system perspective would not predict a gradual, proportional decrease in prejudice while a society becomes more desegregated. It rather leads to anticipate that patterns of prejudice resist small changes in intergroup contact, but might change abruptly when desegregation has reached a certain threshold. Where this tipping point lies and what exactly happens once it has been reached depends on how contact interacts with the full range of other relevant factors. Change scenarios can therefore not be extrapolated easily from one context to another. A proper identification of the context-boundedness of the psychosocial processes involved calls for more comparative, multisite studies, and the proper modelling of the intervening systems dynamics for further complex, multi-iterative simulation studies. Meanwhile, the core tenet of a scale-sensitive approach – i.e., that psychosocial outcomes are discontinuous across levels of analysis and likely to scale up in unpredictable ways – is empirically well-sustained by

multi-level analyses, for example of the impact of exposure to violent conflict (Elcheroth, 2006; Elcheroth et al., 2013), ideological climates (Fasel, Green, & Sarrasin, 2013) or intergroup contact (Christ et al., 2014; Penic, Elcheroth, & Morselli, 2017).

When the generalisations made in study conclusions are implausible because they rest on untenable assumptions – e.g., that single causal factors produce stable effects, or that the effects of multiple factors cumulate and scale-up linearly – then the policy recommendations derived from these generalisations become similarly vulnerable (see Pettigrew & Hewstone, 2017). Conducting an extensive review of prejudice reduction interventions and the methods used to assess their impact, Paluck and Green (2009) have concluded that in “order to formulate policies about how to reduce prejudice, one currently must extrapolate well beyond the data, using theoretical presuppositions to fill in the empirical gaps” (p. 357). Based on these findings, Paluck (2012) has formulated a *pragmatic critique* of the simple road, using a poignant medical analogy: “it is as if the field has vetted a few pediatric procedures, while giving the rest of the population drugs that have never been tested” (p. 184). What is at issue here is the field’s omission to systematically test the impact of the prescribed interventions in actual ecological settings, beyond the scale of a classroom. So far, with just a few exceptions, it looks as if scholars either test their causal claims with a randomised design in a highly simplified lab setting and then freely extrapolate to the real world, or else immerse themselves into an ecological setting but compromise on the design (and then again end up with bold extrapolations to interpret causation and prescribe action). In both cases, theoretical assumptions, scholarly imagination and moral good-will are called in to make up for more systematic, large-scale and cost-intensive research designs, which are typically side-lined on the simple road, because they are seen as unfeasible, inefficient or simply unnecessary.

Incorporating Multiple Perspectives

Two aspects are striking about the four critical approaches exposed in the previous section. First, all four raise a fundamental question and delimit the (narrow) scope of insights that can be reached when the simple road becomes a single road. Each of them highlights the necessity of expanding current research practices, at least in one particular direction. Second, while there are some connections and overlaps, the four critiques appear to be grounded in partially differing epistemological assumptions, which are likely to complicate their further integration. For example, the constructivist critique sits uneasily with the simple definitions of conflict actors that are typically used in dynamical system models. It is also unlikely that the constructivist and normative critiques would easily accept the notion of randomised (field) experiments as a methodological gold standard, or the indicators of successful intervention that the pragmatic critique sees as part of the cure. Vice-versa, from the point of view of the pragmatic critique and its focus on developing reliable evaluations of the impact of real-world interventions, some of the research practices through which the constructivist critique has developed might be seen as guided by problematic methodological relativism. Finally, the ecological critique largely rests on the understanding that unpredictable patterns emerge and unintended consequences occur when psychosocial dynamics scale up, and is therefore likely to spot out problematic shortcuts in the morally engaged approach underlying the normative critique, when it tends to assume agency and to infer action strategies from observed behaviour or collective outcomes.

As a likely consequence of these epistemological differences, there is a risk that the concurrent critical movements will lead to an increased fragmentation of the field, rather than converge toward its reconfiguration. In effect, the task of building new research practices that would adequately address the well-founded critiques from *all* sides

appears titanic. To our knowledge, no study published so far and no existing research programme can claim to have done so. In this context, humility becomes a first quality good to have. The replacement of the 'simple road' by a new research paradigm able to overcome all of its shortcomings might not be a realistic goal for tomorrow. Today's question is how to build a larger path in the right direction.

It is in this spirit that we contend that the field has a promising turn to take by opening a larger space for multiple perspectives: for multiple voices in our samples, for multiple positions from where we listen to these voices, and for multiple sensors with which we capture them.

Multiple Voices

If one looks for places to build bridges across the critical strands, their shared interest in complex configurations certainly provides a good starting point. All four approaches discussed above take issue with the practice of studying a specific actor, motive or factor in isolation from the wider context, system or bundle of forces within which it operates. The common objective appears to be to make visible a broader range of experiences, stakes, and options, and the ways how they interact with each other. A plausible means to work towards this objective is to include a more diverse range of research participants, and to allow them to express themselves from more diverse positions, i.e., not just as representatives of a pre-defined group in a pre-defined conflict binary (see [Cohrs, Uluğ, Stahel, & Kısiloğlu, 2015](#)).

The different contributions to the special thematic section show different ways how this can be done in practice. [Acar's \(2019, this section\)](#) contribution adopts a methodology apt to reveal both the short-sightedness of an often-used conflict binary – the Turkish state versus the country's Kurdish minority – and the different understandings of the conflict that become possible once the binary is broken up. Her research gives voice to those who are part of the Kurdish minority *and* of the security apparatus of the Turkish state, as part of its village guard system. The analysis allows understanding how the village guards have become trapped in a conflict where either side treats them with suspicion and hostility, but also why conflict transformation scenarios that ignore their lucid appraisals of the cost of the conflict, and do not engage with their fears and dilemmas, are bound to miss a critical piece of the puzzle.

[Cuénoud González and Clémence \(2019, this section\)](#) similarly give voice to a group oblique to the frontlines typically identified in the long-standing Colombian conflict. Their interviews of de-mobilised combatants make visible a specific identity and social condition that concerns former guerrilla fighters alike former paramilitaries, but which is often actively hidden by the demobilised themselves. Their analysis further recontextualises a normative assumption that runs through the literature, which posits that transparency is necessarily a (public) good and that secrets are bad for individuals as for communities. The former combatants interviewed by Cuénoud González and Clémence display an array of good reasons, from their point of view, to lie to their communities and sometimes even to their families. The threats of stigma, marginalisation and, in some cases, retaliation are real, and the actual costs or benefits of transparency vary with local configurations. The overall evidence suggests, ironically, that identities of former combatants are more likely to lubricate social life in conflict-ridden communities when they are concealed than when they are disclosed.

Two further contributions show how bringing in new voices allows for a change in perspective, even in the over-studied context of Israeli-Palestinian contact experiences. [Nicholson \(2019, this section\)](#) takes a refreshing distance from the prevalent contact intervention paradigm by not treating the studied setting of intergroup encounters –

i.e., the natural setting of a mixed-staffed hospital – as a normative model but, explicitly, as a case whose epistemological interest lies in its absolute exceptionality: as a “bubble” of equality that ends as soon as the white coats are taken off. Freed from the expectation that the experience of encounter is, or ought to be, transferable, the study gives voice to the dilemmas and contradictory experiences of a highly atypical group. It shows how their organisational social microcosm is neither a reflection, nor a forerunner of the broader societal context, but a place from where to make the routinized daily experiences of segregation, discrimination and structural violence look strange again.

Albzour, Penic, Nasser, and Green (2019, this section) extend the scope of voices taken into account in several directions. First, they study a group often left out in research on Israeli-Palestinian relations: West Bank Palestinians. Second, they survey a general sample within this group rather than focusing on a particular subgroup involved in a specific kind of encounter. Third and most important, instead of assuming the moral value of supporting certain forms of intergroup cooperation – or else, of resisting an oppressive system – and just measuring to what extent participants’ attitudes fit with what is assumed desirable, Albzour et al. treat the moral-political controversy itself as an object of study. That is, they first observe how different Palestinians relate to different forms of cross-group interaction, and then show how specific action dilemmas, between ‘cooperation’ and ‘resistance’, play out for specific types of contact.

Multiple Listening Posts

A second promising junction point between the critical strands is that they all appear to recognise the value of a more realistic approach to study social change. That is, rather than abstracting one mechanism and speculating on how it feeds into a hypothetical total process, critiques from different sides call for research strategies that first allow for a direct view on the total process, before possibly zooming in on specific mechanisms. Studying change holistically is, admittedly, an ambitious goal and no analysis will ever be able to show all facets of a conflict dynamic. In practice, the relevant question is therefore how to achieve a *good enough* ‘tri-dimensional’ view of the dynamic, which means a view into those blindspots that normally prevent a static observer noticing qualitative shifts at critical turning points (see Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017). The most promising response to the challenge is ‘to move angles’ or, reverting to the acoustic terminology used in the previous section, to multiply the posts from which to listen to multiple voices. More prosaically, studying change requires multiple time-points in the research design or analytic grid, and studying how relevant drivers of change (or stability) combine their effects requires a multi-factorial approach. Here too, the contributions to the special thematic section open interesting avenues for concretising this methodological aspiration in the context of specific case studies.

Moss’ (2019, this section) study on leadership strategies in Sudan provides a good example of a holistic design: rather than singling out one strategy, the study shows how the regime’s divide-and-rule tactics have combined with a bundle of other repressive strategies to keep an unpopular regime in power over three decades. This long period of power-political stability, social turmoil and humanitarian disaster is analysed through the primary accounts of political opponents as well as secondary sources. Showing how the regime has adapted to a historical chain of challenges, Moss moves the analysis beyond the lens of ‘intractability’: the longevity of violent confrontation does not simply flow from a blocked situation on the ground, but represents an active achievement of a remarkably resilient regime, finding ever-new ways to protect its power-political interests. Far from telling a tale about the absence of change, Moss’ analysis enables an original understanding of how changing leadership strategies are core to the maintenance of the conflict dynamic.

Twali (2019, this section) adds a further 'listening post' to the analysis of the Sudanese civil war, capturing voices within the South Sudanese diaspora. Her participants recount conflict events and turns from a distance, spatially and temporally. This particular perspective, in combination with the author's theoretical sensibility, create an interesting space to make visible the fluidity of identities. Participants typically do not define the groups involved – 'us and them' – in the same way when referring to different periods of the conflict. Their retrospective accounts provide rich reflections on how groups change in conflicts and how the meaning of collective suffering evolves accordingly.

Surenthiraraj and De Mel (2019, this section) similarly look at conflict from the perspective of the relocated, but they move the focus to the experience of expulsion itself, and to the long-term consequences of resettlement. Through the accounts of their research participants who are part of an 'internally displaced' community in postwar Sri Lanka, Surenthiraraj and De Mel question the experience of living with a refugee status and of passing it on to the next generation, in a changing policy context. Their analysis shows how new collective identities, such as being a 'Northern Muslim', emerge from conflict-induced collective trauma and how individual trajectories, community norms and state policies interact to freeze or unfreeze collective identities within survivor communities.

The transmission of historical violence and trauma play an even more central role in Neufeld and Schmitt's (2019, this section) contribution. Neufeld and Schmitt listen to current actors – parents and teachers from a Canadian aboriginal community – who are themselves embedded in a longer cross-generational chain of transmission. Their accounts display contrasting appraisals of the costs and benefits of sharing a traumatic history of colonial oppression with the next generation. The analysis shows that positioning one's groups as either victim or resilient depends on the larger intergroup configuration and on its subjective relevance for different community members.

Multiple Sensors

Bridging critical developments rooted in different research traditions is unlikely to function without openness to methodological pluralism. In addition to more diversified samples and spatio-temporal frames, more diversified methods of observation represent a third powerful tool to study facets of conflict dynamics which are left unobserved on the simple road. Multi-methods studies, programmes or research paradigms potentially allow combining the assessment of ecological outcomes of a total process of change with a more fine-grained understanding of the role of critical actors, events or encounters.

The contributions to this special thematic section do not cover the full range of methods needed to address the challenges laid out in the previous section. The tendency to over-rely on 'self-reporting' noted by Vollhardt and Bilali (2008) might also apply to this section, although the distinction between 'reporting' and 'acting' is not always clear-cut. Surenthiraraj and De Mel (2019, this section) as well as Neufeld and Schmitt (2019, this section) clearly foreground the analysis of situated speech acts. Virtually all contributions include some analysis of what research participants accomplish with their discourse, rather than just taking their words as a source of information on the reported behaviour. For sure though, the absence among the contributions of longitudinal studies, field experiments and complex simulations is notable and regrettable. The current scarcity of these methods, in the field as in this section, certainly reflects their demanding and resource-intensive character. Combining these demands with the specific requirements of fieldwork in conflict zones – of which the section features excellent examples – remains a disciplinary challenge, which calls for a collective strategy and a bundling of capacities beyond the determination and skills of individual researchers.

Notwithstanding, the special section displays interesting examples of multi-methods analyses of conflict settings. For example, [Cuénoud González and Clémence \(2019, this section\)](#) as well as [Albzour et al. \(2019, this section\)](#) combine qualitative and quantitative elements in their analyses, which enables them to articulate personal accounts with contextualising patterns, informing on social norms and on the positioning of minority stances within a broader spectrum of attitudes. [Moss \(2019, this section\)](#) as well as [Neufeld and Schmitt \(2019, this section\)](#) incorporate a key informants approach in their analysis, which combines (expert) interviews with observations of collective deliberations (within focus groups) and with the scrutiny of relevant documentary sources.

Departing From the Simple Road

Our introductory reflections have led us to make a plea for multiple perspectives in the social and political psychology of peace and conflict studies, and to break it down into a call for more diversified samples, for more multi-temporal multi-factorial approaches, and for more methodological pluralism. This call is grounded in our understanding that, rather than fighting epistemological battles, incorporating more diverse perspectives in our scholarly praxis holds the potential to take the field a step further. While we do not believe in panaceas, we do believe that a field growing along the three exposed axes would increase its capacity to bridge its most important critical developments, and to promote more relevant research practices. Each of the articles published in this special thematic section displays powerful inspiring examples along one or several of the three axes. Put side by side, they do yet not form a new (post-simple-road) research paradigm, but they provide a formidable condensation of good reasons to build it.

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