



11 Peace and Conflict Transformation Research

Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice.

Kurt Lewin

As a social phenomenon, → conflicts are inevitable components of human development and social change. Violence in conflict, however, is not inevitable – and conflict transformation research seeks to explore conditions, strategies and policies for sustaining patterns of non-violent behaviour amongst conflicting parties, particularly in protracted social and ethnopolitical conflict. It aims to support conflict parties in building, restoring and maintaining constructive, just relations in order to abolish the use of force as a means of interaction in conflict. In this context, conflicts and their handling should not be looked upon as

simplistic linear phenomena that start, escalate and stop for all actors and all sectors in the same way. They need to be comprehended in their interdependent and systemic dimensions and in their dynamic nature.

Research and practice informing each other

Conflict transformation research does not encompass a grand theory, but generates theory elements from field research and from close interaction with practitioners and the conflicting parties themselves. Nevertheless, it is theory-guided. Of particular importance is theorising that addresses the differences between inter-personal and inter-group → conflict transformation, and between symmetrical and asymmetrical conflicts. Moreover, research on conflict transformation incorporates knowledge of various disciplines (beginning with political science, peace and conflict studies, sociology and social psychology, history, anthropology, ethnology, law, communication, educational science/peace education and more).

Conflict transformation research can be considered a specific strand of peace and conflict research which pays particular attention to bringing about supportive conditions for practical progress in peacebuilding. It starts from the premise that concepts and theory must evolve in a continuous, reflective and critical exchange with practice, which requires putting concepts to the test in concrete settings and debating their validity with practitioners from many backgrounds and in many localities. Strong links to the field of policy are also required. In brief: theoretical approaches should contribute to developing new political and social strategies, and conflict transformation practice should inspire considerations on theory.

Any active participation by conflicting parties, practitioners and policy-makers in research necessitates paying respect to the diversity of actors' stakes. By bringing the actors to the fore, deeper socio-cultural and behavioural aspects of action and decision-

making can be explored in the context of change. Following this methodology, the agenda of research is influenced and shaped increasingly by those who are immediately affected by its results. The growing interest of practitioners in becoming involved in inclusive patterns of research has begun to narrow the gap by reconciling the communities of research and practice, by motivating both towards collective learning and by encouraging researchers to collaborate with practitioners and practitioners to create reflective feedback loops into research. Collaborative research in teams of researchers and practitioners aimed at supporting conflict transformation increases the knowledge on how different actors, processes and structures contribute (or not) to peacebuilding processes. Berghof considers inclusive, bottom-up, participatory and reflective methods of research – of which action research elements are an important part – a great opportunity for generating the knowledge and support necessary for sustained conflict transformation.

Action research: participatory, inclusive and change-oriented

Action research can be useful in this context as one of several research methods. The first projects evolved in the 1970s, mainly in the university sector and in work with marginalised groups and urban districts, but also in community projects in Latin America, generally led by social psychologists. The purpose of action research is to undertake studies into the conditions and impacts of various forms of social action. It also aspires to influence social action; in other words, it is normative in focus. Its agenda concentrates on specific social grievances.

The main objective of the research is not to test theoretical hypotheses but to bring about practical change in the problematic situation which is the subject of study. This is viewed as a holistic social process: individual variables are not isolated and collected as “objective data”; instead, data collection itself is interpreted as part of the social process. Action research involves the use of qualitative approaches based on empirical social research,

including the evaluation of project reports, participatory monitoring, individual or group interviews with project participants and members of the target groups, and surveys, but also ethnographic methods and creative ways of investigation like theatre work. The methods aim to exert direct influence on events within society. The researcher temporarily abandons his or her distance to the research object and is intensively involved, during certain phases, in the process being studied. The subjects being observed and studied are not cast in a passive role but participate actively in the debate about objectives, and in data collection and evaluation. For the researchers, a precise definition of roles and ongoing self-reflection are essential.

Action Research Process



Source: University of New South Wales, Department of Education and Training

Action research therefore not only attempts to accumulate knowledge and enhance understanding of how social interactions function; it intervenes in a direct and practical way, and involves the actors being studied in the process on an ongoing basis. Academic findings are thus translated into practice, and research concepts and theoretical constructs are subjected to practical testing at the same time. The continuous feedback of results to project participants, through feedback workshops and discussion of interim and final reports, is essential. Designed for a longer timeframe, action research can provide valuable information about the opportunities for, and limits to, peacebuilding strategies.

Practical needs determine appropriate research methods

It is certainly true that not every peacebuilding measure can be accompanied by a comprehensive research project, as in most cases those who fund peace practice will finance short-term evaluations at best. Nor can action research be considered the one and only approach or method. As described above, substantial action research requires long-term field research, which usually does not correspond with the budgets and funding lines of academic donor agencies. Nevertheless, in order to improve knowledge on peace practice, the underlying ideas of action research can help in designing and implementing projects that aim to support the creation of inclusive structures and sustained practices of non-violent interaction. These include above all: respect towards those who are subjects of the study, clarification of the roles and aims of those who conduct the research, involvement of the stakeholders in the development of research questions and hypotheses, and transparency of results through the use of feedback loops.

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