Chapter 2. Conflict Escalation as a Perspective in Social Sciences

> "Escalation in Afghanistan: Erdoğan suggests face-to-face meeting with Taliban leaders." (Der Spiegel, 12.08.2021)
>
> "Escalation in vaccine dispute: London summons EU diplomat." (Die Zeit, 10.03.2021)
>
> "Tree sittings by student climate activists in Ravensburg – Mayor: A new stage of one-sided escalation" (Schwäbische Zeitung, 17.05.2021)
>
> "An escalating love quarrel: 38-year-old man injured with a knife" (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 8.08.2021)

From a life partner who refuses to do the dishes to a labour union striking to demand higher wages to a government and an opposition disputing mutual claims – conflict is an ubiquitous element of everyday life.[1] However, there is a large diversity of conflicts in all these spheres of social life. The bulk of conflicts show up as cursory bagatelles whereas only few conflicts end up in situations of organised collective violence, e.g., as an armed conflict. It is thus crucial to find out more about those procedural settings where everyday conflicts begin to become meaningful in a broader societal context. Broadly speaking, this evolution, referred to as *conflict escalation*, is understood as intensification with regard to the observed extent and the means used (see Pruitt et al. 2003: 87–91; Mitchell 2014: 71–75). In this context, conflict escalation is further characterised by

> "processes of circular interaction that lead to the growth and restructuring of the parties, generating new reasons and pretexts for applying additional means, thus leading to an expansion and fundamentalization of the content of the conflict" (Eckert and Willems 2003: 1183).

1 Major parts of chapter 2 are published in: Bösch, R. (2017) Conflict Escalation. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. Oxford University Press/International Studies Association.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, to fully grasp the complex issue of conflict escalation, the present study prepares to transcend some of the more 'traditional' concepts. Given its dynamics and, to a certain degree, its autonomous nature, conflict escalation here is conceptualised as both an evolving process and a self-stabilising structure, or, in other words, as a social system in its own right.[2]

Research on conflict escalation is indeed a broad topic that covers agendas in different disciplines (see, e.g., Byrne and Senehi 2009). Hence, in relation to respective empirical research interests, many concepts and theories of conflict escalation have been advanced and consolidated. The aim of this chapter is to explore existing accounts and thus to illustrate various perspectives on conflict escalation as a substantive research theme. In doing so, it not only shows the connections to other more prominent strands (e.g., conflict resolution, conflict transformation) but also sheds light on the significance of the present research question in an overall research context. *How do conflicts escalate?* Which answers have been given to the question in research so far? Instead of portraying a heavy list of (sub-) discipline-oriented approaches to answer this question, this chapter is intended to lay the grounding for a social science perspective on conflict escalation. For this purpose, it is dedicated to reveal the sometimes hidden or at least implicit origins of the concept of conflict escalation in different scientific discourses.

The first section ("Conflict Escalation: A Brief Intellectual History") gives a concise overview of influential voices in the topic's scientific history that is closely intertwined with the history of sociology, political science/IR and PCS. The second section ("Major Perspectives on Conflict Escalation") opens up the field according to its (meta-) theoretical dimensions. Finally, the third section ("Staking Overlapping Claims: Conflict Resolution, Conflict Transformation, and Conflict Escalation") further illustrates the role of 'application-oriented research' in the field. Finally, a brief summary ("Conflict Escalation in Social Sciences Discourses: Summing up the Hightlights") condenses the chapter's quintessence.

2.1 Conflict Escalation: A Brief Intellectual History

As cited in countless introductory chapters in PCS and beyond, etymologically, 'conflict' traces back to the Latin verb *confligere*, which means 'fighting', 'battling' or 'struggling'. More precisely, the verb has a double meaning, depending on its transitive or intransitive use. On the one hand, it means intentionally clashing and beating each other, thus

2 As chapter 3 demonstrates in detail, conceiving of conflicts as social systems represents one of the theoretical centrepieces of this contribution. In chapter 2, too, while going through selected social science discourses, this idea appears several times. However, in none of these contexts, it has been elaborated as far-reaching as in the present study. Hence, this chapter intends to portray classical roots of concepts in conflict analysis with a special focus on those segments and forerunners in social science literature being more or less outspoken on the process of conflict escalation. Coming from this rather classical foundation and building on the experiences of this study's empirical research, chapter 8 shows how connectable the findings are in view of more recent perspectives on conflict (escalation) analysis in PCS, particularly related to "civilian conflict management" (Gulowski and Weller 2017).

clearly emphasising the dimension of (violent) behaviour and physical action. On the other hand, 'confligere' also stands for the more abstract state of having an argument, a dispute, or an opposition, thus indicating the structural dimension of a social phenomenon (see Bonacker and Imbusch 2010: 68–69). In comparison to these very common and elementary linguistic statements about conflict, 'escalation' is usually not an object of such explications. Hence, to begin with, escalation has its origins in the Latin noun *scalae*, which means 'steps', 'stairs' or 'scaling', metaphorically suggesting a process of becoming greater or higher. Even more notable, however, and analogical to the linguistic roots of conflict, there is also an explicit transitive and intransitive meaning of the verbs that have been deduced from the Latin origin (e.g., to scale, to escalate). In this context, escalating signifies both an action strategy and an abstract description of a state of affairs in a dynamic social relationship (Zartman and Faure 2005: 8–10). Both meanings have played a decisive role in major scientific debates about concepts of conflict escalation.

This section deals with those prominent forerunners in conflict theory[3] – Georg Simmel, Lewis A. Coser and Ralf G. Dahrendorf – who not only developed a concept of conflict as a state *but also* integrated pioneering ideas about the societal process of conflict escalation, even though the label itself was not used literally. For a long time, research on social conflict was predominantly concerned with 'factor-oriented' studies searching for general social conditions and specific constellations of interests or actors causing conflicts to arise (see von Trotha 1997: 16–20). At the time, conflict escalation, both in sociology and political science, was not a field of research in its own right (see Eckert and Willems 2003: 1182). However, those classical authors indeed wrote about conflict as a profound social transformation with both integrative and disintegrative functions for society. Therefore, they had at least an implicit idea of conflict as not only being structurally given but also as a processual phenomenon that manifests at different scales.

According to Simmel (1992[1923]), conflicts represent forms of socialisation. In his conflict theory, Simmel highlights both destructive and particularly constructive aspects of conflictive interaction, e.g., relating to the development and integration of social groups (or societies as a whole). Against this background, Simmel distinguishes between different configurations or "forms of conflict" (with increasing intensity: competition, dispute, and combat), thus indicating that socialisation processes can take intensive (not to say violent) forms. Those forms, in turn, are characterised by the means used and by the degree to which the conflict identity is interwoven with the issue at stake (Simmel 1992[1923]: 247–336). Based on Simmel's work, Coser (1956) further examines the conditions under which conflicts get functional or dysfunctional for society. In this regard, Coser analyses the controversial field of integrative and disintegrative aspects of social conflict both with reference to groups and society as a whole.[4] For Coser, pluralis-

3 For a comprehensive overview on the vast literature conceptually dealing with conflict in social sciences see e.g. Bonacker (2008).

4 As can be retained from Coser, the possible socialising effects of social conflict at the level of groups (e.g. strengthening solidarity, cohesion, and normative integration) do not necessarily correspond to constructive effects at the level of society. In this context, Coser introduces the distinction between conflicts as means of transformation ("realistic conflict") and conflicts as self-purpose ("non-realistic conflict"), the latter being dysfunctional for society since they do not improve the flexibility and resilience of institutions (Coser 1956: 33–66).

tic societies are typically characterised by a large number and variety of conflicts. Since individuals have affiliations to various interest groups and thus to multiple identities, conflicts are generally reduced in intensity (Coser 1956: 67–86). Following Coser's conflict theoretical thoughts, processes in dysfunctional conflicts are particularly shaped by the emergence of a strong and focused conflict-related identity that represses the multiple social affiliations that existed before and thus is supposed to have a boosting influence on conflict escalation. Referring to Simmel and Coser, Dahrendorf's (1959) conflict theory represents a structural theory that also explains social change through social conflict. Partly drawing on Marx (though emancipating himself form Marx's fixation on class as a crucial societal category), Dahrendorf considers conflict as an unavoidable and universal phenomenon since the societal organisation and exercise of power and authority (whatever the political constitution of the respective society may be) constantly produces diverging interests and, hence, "latent conflict" between individuals, groups, or classes (Dahrendorf 1959: 210–213). So, does this structural predisposition for power conflicts always lead to "manifest conflict"? According to Dahrendorf, yes. However – and this contains his implicit idea of conflict escalation – there is an empirical variability in the intensity of conflicts which is essentially influenced by the social mobility of individuals.[5] Hence, Dahrendorf sketched a proto concept of conflict escalation (i.e. a continuum from latent to manifest conflict), which can still be considered a seminal piece for social science conflict research.

In political science, conflict escalation was by and large associated with the realm of international politics. As IR and Peace Research entered the academic stage in the 1930s, the question of war and the definition of peace were focal points of the discipline (see Stephenson 2010). Since that time period, conflict theories in IR have basically been dealing with two key problem areas: a non-existing international monopoly of violence and a lack of internationally binding norms. Realist thinking of international politics as being basically conflict-prone and conflict-driven emerged out of those fundamental 'systemic' features.[6] Given this history, conflict escalation was certainly an IR topic right from the start since escalation processes lie at the heart of most state interaction (Carlson 1995). Arms races, deterrence, armed conflict, or war… escalation processes are intimately associated with situations referred to as "international crises".[7] In crisis situations, actors have to decide whether or not they want to pursue an escalating strategy, i.e. exert coercive pressure and thus impose costs on opponents. In this sense, escalation has to be thought of as a fine-grained game of competitive risk taking which is embedded in an overall bargaining process. Following Zartman and Faure (2005: 9), parties can have various (ir)rational motives to promote escalation: winning, not losing, covering investments (actual and previous costs of escalations), gaining support (from third

5 For Dahrendorf (1959: 234–236), the ultimate merit of a conflict theory depends on its ability to explain how, in comparable structural situations, a power conflict escalates into a violent revolution in one case and ends up in democratically controlled reform policies in the other.

6 At the same time, however, the sovereignty of nation states proved to be one of the very few reliable global norms. Following Hobbes and Kant, ultimately all modern schools of thought in IR, i.e., neo-/realism, institutionalism, liberalism or Marxism, have been built upon these fundamental opening questions (sovereignty, conflict-proneness) in conflict studies (Bonacker 2008: 21–26).

7 See for example Schelling (1960), Jervis (1976), Lebow (1984), or Brecher and Wilkenfeld (2000).

parties), seizing an advantage or target of opportunity, feeling powerful, rewarding oneself, or punishing the opponent. For those early and influential IR theorists dealing with conflict development systematically, escalation represents a more or less rational foreign policy strategy in the repertoire of states (see, e.g., Kahn 1965; Deutsch 1968: 141–157).

In contrast to these rather transitive interpretations, 'systems thinkers', particularly in neorealism, have highlighted structural features in which conflict escalation is understood as a specific constellation of states, "polarity", in the global system.[8] In an effort to bring together these ideas about conflict escalation in international politics (be it in state perspective or from a systemic point of view) as well as classical theoretical thinking about conflict and social change, Pruitt et al. (2003[1986]: 101–120) developed the "structural change model". This model tries to conceptualise conflict escalation independent of any predefined level of analysis and thus represents a model of conflict evolution that has been very influential for the development of conflict studies as an interdisciplinary endeavour. For Pruitt et al. (2003[1986]: 88–91), processes of conflict escalation are characterised by different simultaneous transformations, from

- light to heavy (means used),
- small to large (material/immaterial resources needed),
- specific to general (issues addressed),
- few to many (number of participants involved),
- and from winning to hurting (orientations dominating).[9]

Their approach is thus more interested in describing and understanding the evolution of conflictive relations than in party-oriented strategies for getting the most out of a given structural conflict (see Pearson d'Estrée 2008: 75–77). Whilst transcending the (neo-) realist idea of systemic change and reanimating classical conflict theoretical thought, the structural change model sees escalation as

> "a particular type of intensification by steps across time, as a change in nature rather than a simple change in degree" (Zartman and Faure 2005: 6).

In conclusion, it can be stated that although the label 'conflict escalation' rarely appears in classical conflict research, parts of its conceptual substance are quasi omnipresent in these works. Due to the dominant realist paradigm at the outset of the field's emergence, IR limited itself to a foreign policy view on conflict escalation or, in its systemic variants, to a structural determinism without getting into the details of specific state behaviour. However, based on an integrative approach with regard to theory *and* praxis, conflict res-

8 See exemplarily Waltz (1979), Walt (1987), and Copeland (1996). While differing in their ideas about the effect of those constellations, those authors put forth the argument that the likelihood of conflict escalation is closely linked to the polarity of the international system, i.e., the distribution of capabilities and power between states or, to be more precise, to the dynamic of change that alters these global conditions.

9 For a reformulation of these transformations see Mitchell (2014: 71–75).

olution as a special subfield of PCS (see Stephenson 2010) started to examine the whole life cycle of a conflict, aiming at developing

> "ideas, theories and methods that can improve our understanding of conflict and our collective practice of reduction in violence and enhancement of political processes for harmonizing interest" (Bercovitch et al. 2009: 1).

Therefore, conflict escalation, as a topic often referred to within the context of conflict resolution research, has always been located in between interrelated visions of academics and practitioners. So, in research on negotiation and mediation, for example, the spectrum ranges from rather theory-oriented research in IR that deals with rational or normative motivations in arguing and bargaining processes (e.g., Risse 2000; Müller 2007) to practice-oriented research with a focus on multi track diplomacy or peacebuilding (e.g. Reychler and Paffenholz 2001; Kriesberg 2010). In sum, a truly 'holistic' thinking about conflict escalation, conciliating transitive and intransitive ideas, did not emerge until Pruitt et al. (2003[1986]) presented a comprehensive concept that was able to address escalation at different societal levels and thus integrates sociological and politological thinking in favour of a common social science perspective.

2.2 Major Perspectives on Conflict Escalation

Levels of Analysis

As hinted at earlier, conflict escalation embraces a transitive and an intransitive dimension. This points to a classic metatheoretical issue that has also been referred to, particularly in IR, as the level-of-analysis problem (see Singer 1961; see also Albert and Buzan 2013). According to Waltz (1979), for example, there are three "images" that can be considered to approach international politics: the individual level (i.e. statesmen, leaders), the level of a state's political regime (e.g. democracies, autocracies, hybrids etc.), and the level of the international system (which is composed by states, understood as like-units), whereas (at least in Waltz' idea of neorealism) the latter is regarded as the most relevant one. With reference to this thinking, theoretical statements should not be either reductionist, i.e. drawing conclusions about international politics from the perspective of subsystemic entities only (first and second image), nor holistic, i.e. explaining foreign policy solely on the basis of systemic features (third image) (see Schimmelfennig 1995: 258–259). Surely, Waltz' often-quoted idea of images has encouraged scholars in IR and beyond to clarify which phenomenon they want to explain in relation to specific levels of analysis. However, when focussing on conflict escalation as a social phenomenon that is per se intertwined with different societal levels at once, only a few seminal works in conflict studies have aimed for emancipating themselves from an overly paradigmatic level-of-analysis-thinking.

Galtung (1996) has probably contributed one of the most influential concepts of conflict to social sciences in the recent past (see Diez et al. 2011: 12–13). In his work about the "conflict triangle", conflict is conceptualised as a triangle between contradiction, at-

titude, and behaviour (Galtung 1996: 70–80). In this context, *contradiction* is understood as a perceived incompatibility between positions of actors (e.g., aims, interests, aspirations). *Attitudes*, as the second vertex of the triangle, encompass perceptions and misperceptions of the parties about themselves and their respective opponents (e.g., concerning the causes of the conflict or the allocation of blame). Finally, *behaviour* involves specific actions of the parties to the conflict, e.g., cooperation, yielding, problem solving, contending, coercion, threats, destructive attacks etc. In a full or "manifest" conflict, according to Galtung, all three elements have to be present. However, conflicts are embedded in dynamic processes in which contradictions, attitudes, and behaviour constantly change and influence one another (Ramsbotham et al. 2011: 10–12). Therefore, by contrast, in a "latent" state, a conflict can be constituted by contradictions only, i.e. without any negative attitudes or any contending behaviour. Much of Galtung's work tackles the shift from latent to manifest conflicts. This is where the question of the "right" level of analysis comes into play. Taking the idea of *social* conflicts as point of departure, it is crucial for a contradiction to become a socially "visible" conflict that is pronounced or, more general, communicated in a broader frame of reference, be it, for example, community disputes over garbage disposal, labour-management struggles, class-based revolutions, civil rights struggles, border conflicts (Kriesberg 1998: 1–2), or transnational conflicts (Weller and Bösch 2015). In other words, the very empirical nature and spectrum of conflict escalation longs for a transcending of that what is conventionally referred to as levels of analysis.

Against the background of the ideal of parsimonious theory construction on the one hand (Waltz 1979: 60–78) and the conflict triangle on the other hand (Galtung 1996: 70–80), the greater part of works explicitly addressing conflict escalation have limited themselves to specific levels of analysis (such as individuals, groups, networks, social movements, organisations, states, state dyads, the (world) system) and have prevalently focussed on a single vertex of the triangle (e.g. on the dimension of behaviour only). Sociobiological approaches, for example, argue that in conflicts between small groups (e.g., youth cliques) raising the stakes in order to achieve a goal against an opponent, as a general rule, does not follow a rational logic. In contrast, violence, being a resource available at any time in conflict, is rather driven by biologically predetermined emotions like fear, anger, or vengeance and is thus an impulsive action (Eckert and Willems 2003: 1185–1186). In socio-psychological works (see particularly Tajfel and Turner 1979), findings from research on interaction between individuals have been transferred to a dyadic intergroup level perspective suggesting that relative deprivation and discrimination are not only ordinary processes of social comparison between groups but furthermore important factors in collective identity formation (Tajfel and Turner 1979: 40–43; Cook-Huffman 2009). Based on the idea of social identity formation as being a conflictive process per se, socio-psychological studies have also evoked a strong response in research on "civil wars" and domestic conflict (see e.g., Horowitz 1985, Gurr 2000). In this regard, conflict escalation is conceptualised as a spiral, whereby cause and blame are reciprocally assigned. It thus represents a self-amplifying mechanism that simultaneously downgrades the out-group and upgrades the in-group. During this process, violence against the other ultimately gets incorporated in normative belief systems. Conflict spirals represent vicious circles of insecurity, fear, lack of information, stereotypes,

deficient communication, and an endless chain of mutual counteractions (Pruitt et al. 2003[1986]: 96–100). To sum up, however, the analytical focus in socio-psychological works remains on societal (sub-)groups.

Other theories on conflict escalation are based on the paradigm of rational choice and agency. As mentioned above, from a foreign policy analysis perspective, escalative strategies and violent action in conflict can be understood as the result of utilitarian calculations.[10] Thus, decision makers engage in conflict escalation purposefully as a mutually coercive or bargaining strategy (Zartman and Faure 2005: 8–10). Rational choice and game theory approaches have also been adopted in research about domestic conflict. In "ethnic conflicts", for example, individual engagement in violent escalation strategies has often been interpreted as a regression to atavistic instincts and irrational hatred. By contrast, rational-choice-based approaches have convincingly substantiated the assertion that in a wide range of armed conflicts, particularly in "war economies", the individual/collective acquisition and allocation of resources (natural resources, arms, people) is realised using violence (Elwert et al. 1999). Thus, actors in "new wars", e.g., warlords, guerrilla fighters, drug barons, terrorists, or governments, are interested in perpetuating cycles of violence to generate stable rents (Reno 2000). However, according to the greed vs. grievance debate, actors pursuing escalative strategies in war economies can be driven both by economic and political motives. In this context, escalation in new wars has often been associated with the phenomenon of limited statehood (see Kaldor 1999; Kalyvas 2001).

For research on armed conflict and war in IR and PCS, one of the main challenges in examining conflict escalation is to overcome a rigid (and sometimes unconscious) fixation on the nation state (see Daase 2003: 176–178). Indeed, there are elaborated and highly diagnostic concepts, such as 'intrastate armed conflicts', 'one-sided violence', 'political violence' or 'militarised interstate disputes' that have been developed on the basis of comprehensive empirical research and global databases.[11] However, given the insights from the new wars perspective mentioned above, the transnational dimension of conflict escalation has become hyper-obvious (see, e.g., Chojnacki 2008; Francis 2009). Against the background of the profits from the global trade in 'blood diamonds' from conflict areas, worth billions of dollars, the cross-border recruitment of soldiers, and, ideologically, the actualisation of regional ethnic identities, those theoretical approaches that consider just a single level of analysis are necessarily stretched to their limits when explaining conflict as a complex societal phenomenon. In this context, a great deal of research on conflict adheres to a kind of implicit "methodological nationalism", i.e. the methodological praxis of observing the nation state as a key conceptual reference or, at least, as vital analytical category (see Jabri 1996: 1–10; Chernilo 2011). Certainly, it is an ambitious undertaking to develop a methodological approach that would allow one to transcend the levels of analysis framework, particularly when it comes to the integration of processes and structures.

10 For this, see particularly Schelling (1960), Kahn (1965) or Lebow (1984).

11 See the *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project* (ACLED 2017), the *Working Group for Research on the Causes of War* (AKUF 2018), the *Correlates of War Project* (COW 2015), the *Uppsala Conflict Data Program* (UCDP 2020a). For detailed information see the projects' websites; see also Schwank et al. (2013) for a compact overview on the different databases.

Structure and Process

According to Dahrendorf (1959) discussed above, conflict theories need to meet the challenge of integrating both the structural dimension and the processual dimension in order to understand conflict as drivers of social change. For a long time, theories of social conflict have particularly concentrated on questions of why conflicts emerge in different societal settings (e.g., in organisations, between groups, between collectives in national societies, or between states). They focussed on 'generalisable" social conditions and 'objective' factors for conflicts to arise. At the same time, little attention has been paid to processual questions of how conflicts develop and how escalation takes place to the point that organised collective violence occurs (see Eckert and Willems 2003; Elwert et al. 1999).

Since the 1990s, there are at least two directions of research on violent conflict in IR and PCS. One strand equates violent conflict with its structural causes, and the other strand foregrounds the coming-into-being of a conflict (see, e.g., Schlichte 2011). With its positivist natural science orientation and its methods of correlational analysis, the former has long been dominant, for example by highlighting causal explanations that deal with absolute/relative power gains, economic motives ('greed'), and the impact of ethnic or religious identities (see Daase 2003: 176–194). The latter, however, offers an alternative perspective by stressing the dynamic nature of conflicts, shifting from cause-oriented 'why-questions' to 'how-possible-questions' that ask for constitutive conditions in the production of social phenomena (Wendt 1999). Constructivist approaches have pointed out that conflicts are produced in the framework of discursive constructions of reality (see Weller 2005a). Thus, the 'reality' of conflict is not self-evident and intersubjectively verifiable but rather composed in the context of overlapping perspectives. A "process perspective" on conflict escalation thus asks for how conflict identities and conflict issues develop over time (see, e.g., Collins 2012). Hence, social conflict is not reduced to static conditions that are understood as temporally preceding the conflict. In this sense, specific actors, for example, are not considered as entities of any corresponding 'external' reality of the conflict. Instead, they are seen as changing products of an intersubjective process of attributing meaning regarding the self and the social world (see Bonacker 2007: 4–5). The same applies to issues, positions, and environments of conflict.

Of course, the interplay between societal structures (e.g., institutions, identities, norms) and processes (i.e. actions/practices of individuals, groups, states) is in some way or other at the heart of any comprehensive theory about the social. To understand organised collective violence as a part of conflict escalation, it is therefore critical to bring together these two dimensions. In Gidden's words, according to his theory of structuration, the focus should be on

> "conditions governing the continuity or transformation of structures, which in turn are reproduced relations between actors or collectivities, organised as regular social practices." (Giddens 1984: 66)

Against this background, in an effort to reconsider conflict analysis, Jabri states that conflict studies in IR and in PCS (as in social sciences in general)

> "must incorporate the discursive and institutional continuities which render violent conflict a legitimate and widely accepted mode of human conduct" (Jabri 1996: 1).

Based on these epistemological remarks, research on violent conflict seeks to understand how conflict escalation is interwoven with both the structure and the process of identity formation, incorporating changing norms, role models, interests, institutions etc. In this regard, it is of utmost interest to what extent the legitimisation of organised collective violence gets encoded in conflictive identities. As hinted at earlier, based on the concept of conflict as a triangle as well as on the idea of latent and manifest conflict, Galtung (1996) lays important groundwork, illustrating that contradictions, attitudes and behaviour include structural features and processual elements of a conflict at the same time.

What happened so far: Reviewing influential models of conflict escalation

Building upon Galtung and other conflict theoretical landmarks in the rich history of social sciences, there is a wide range of conflict models. Though, rather few of them explicitly address conflict escalation and deal with the problem of levels of analysis or structure and process mentioned above. This section briefly presents three of the frequently referred to: Glasl's *nine-stage model* (1999), Lund's *curve of conflict* (1996), and Ramsbotham et al.'s *hourglass model* (2011). Each of these models constitutes a conceptual building block for the present study's proceeding.

Glasl's work (1999) represents one of the most illustrative models in the field of conflict escalation (Diez et al. 2011: 13). Even though Glasl dealt with international conflict and civil wars in the early days of his intellectual preoccupation with conflicts, the often-quoted model was originally designed for organisations, particularly for managers, coaches, facilitators, and professionals such as lecturers, teachers, mediators etc. Broadly defined, Glasl understands social conflicts as interactions between actors who perceive incompatibilities concerning their ideas, feelings, or interests (see Glasl 1999: 18–19). His model has been referred to in different societal settings, for example in contexts of partnership and family as well as in situations of armed conflict and war. It is meant as a practical 'handout' and diagnostic tool for conflict facilitators, aiming at sensitising people for the dynamics of conflict escalation. In a more analytical and abstract perspective, it is also intended to outline how the dyadic logic of a conflict relationship develops over time. In marked contrast to other theories and models of escalation, Glasl understands the gradual intensification of the conflict as a "downward movement". According to Glasl,

> "escalation progressively activates deeper and more subconscious levels, both in people and in groups, until these people or groups completely lose their self-control." (Glasl 1999: 84)

Glasl suggests conceptualising conflict as a cycle that consists of nine particular phases at three main levels of conflict escalation (see Glasl 1999: 83–106). At level one, "win-win" (stages 1–3), a difference over an issue gets identified. While different opinions and interests gradually come up, in-and out-groups that share common attitudes, interpre-

tations and interests develop. Increasingly, standpoints begin to become clear-cut and polarised. Since exclusive group thinking dominates, parties see each other as competitors mutually blocking each other's goals. Yet, while competitiveness and cooperation alternate continuously, it is in principle possible that the conflict parties have a fair argument and realise their respective goals, at least partly. At level two, "win-lose" (stages 4–6), the initial "material" basis of the conflict is increasingly ignored. Against the background of stereotypical images of the counterpart, every concrete issue gets associated with the existential question of victory or defeat. Since both parties perceive each other as aggressive and their own actions as defensive, the responsibility for escalation is externalised. Continuous blaming then goes hand in hand with mutually denying the other's moral integrity. Ultimately, conflict parties make use of threats of damaging actions to force the counterpart to do what the party wants. Thereby, the parties get involved in a spiral of threats and counter-threats, while the turbulence of events increases. Finally, at the level three, "lose-lose" (stages 7–9), all parties lose track of their original goals and focus on harming the other. Thus, the basic sense of security has been lost and the counterpart is expected to be on the verge of executing destructive acts. The other is seen as a pure enemy, without human qualities. To suffer less damage than the other party becomes the main goal. In the end, even the price of self-destruction is accepted to destruct the enemy.

Contrary to Glasl's rather detailed model, Lund provides a simplified model of a conflict's ideal-type life history based on its intensity over time (Lund 1996: 37–39). Thus, "the curve of conflict" illustrates how conflicts (between states, groups, individuals) begin and end. The model purports to be a heuristic tool to relate different phases of conflict to one another and to various kinds of third-party intervention.[12] While conflicts may non-linearly oscillate between periods of greater and lesser intensity, Lund's model depicts ideal stages of intensity characterised by different types of actions between parties to a dispute during a conflict. At the stage of "durable peace", a "high level of reciprocity and cooperation" is realised (Lund 1996: 39). When disagreements and disputes arise in this stage, they are treated in institutionalised and constructive ways of accommodating diverse interests. Though, on the basis of persisting value or goal differences, the relationship between actors can become wary and tense, leading to limited cooperation. This stage is still understood as "stable peace", but competition and cooperation are present at the same time. Both in the phase of stable and durable peace, violence is no option. However, when tension and suspicion rise and the parties perceive each other as adversaries, the use of deterrent means is put into play. From this moment on, in Galtung's words, peace gets "negative" or, according to Lund, "unstable". The next stage ("crisis") is therefore characterised by a

12 For a recent reformulation of Lund's model see particularly Levinger (2013: 29–34). The curve of conflict has particularly been referred to in the works of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) "to visualize how conflicts typically evolve over time and how different phases of conflict relate to one another" (see USIP 2015).

> "tense confrontation between armed forces that are mobilized and ready to fight and may engage in threats and occasional low-level skirmishes but have not exerted any significant amount of force" (Lund 1996: 39).

Finally, when organised collective violence becomes an encompassing societal phenomenon, the curve of conflict hits its climax. Then, the threshold of "armed conflict" or "war" is reached. To each of these stages, Lund associates a typical form of conflict management, especially including third-party activities: from "preventive diplomacy" to "crisis management" to "peace enforcement" (Lund 1996: 40–49; Lund 2009).

Like the curve of conflict, the "hourglass model" (Ramsbotham et al. 2011) constitutes a model of conflict escalation that is directly linked to measures of handling conflicts (be it the conflict parties themselves or external actors). Also based on Galtung's ideas on conflict, the hourglass serves as a metaphor pointing out the

> "narrowing/widening of political space that characterizes conflict escalation/de-escalation […]. As [this] space narrows and widens, so different conflict resolution responses become more or less appropriate and possible" (Ramsbotham et al. 2011: 13).

In this sense, at different stages of conflict development, the model includes respective measures, not to avoid conflicts but to avert violence and to pursue conflicts constructively (Kriesberg 1998: 14–22). In a nutshell, it can be stated that the favoured conflict resolution strategies are attributed to each stage of conflict formation (Ramsbotham et al. 2011: 10–32):

Table 1: Stages of Conflict Formation and Favoured Conflict Resolution Strategies according to Ramsbotham et al. 2011

Stage of Conflict Formation (increasing intensity)	**Favoured Conflict Resolution Strategy**
Difference	Conflict Transformation
Contradiction	
Polarisation	Conflict Settlement
Violence	
War	Conflict Containment

(Own table)

Certainly, there are a number of approaches and models mapping conflict escalation as an idealised 'conflict life cycle' in one form or the other. Notwithstanding, Glasl's model ranks among those rather sophisticated models that provide far-reaching and detailed empirical insights since it has been inductively developed. Given its systemic considerations about the level of the relationship in conflict (win-win/win-lose/lose-lose) and its openness as to different levels of analysis, it is also a model with considerable theoretical

aspirations. Yet, the structural and reflexive dimension of Glasl's approach lags behind the high (meta-theoretical) standards a comprehensive conflict theory is supposed to fulfil (e.g., concerning the role of identity formation). Moreover, Glasl's conflict model appears to be inherently deterministic (concerning the secession of stages) whereas the true probabilistic nature of conflict dynamics is obscured (see Pearson d'Estrée 2008: 78–81; Brücher 2011: 27). In contrast to Glasl's model, at first glance, Lund's curve of conflict impresses with its simplicity: it charts the intensity of a conflict (by measuring threatening/violent behaviour) on the vertical axis and the duration of a conflict on the horizontal axis. Therefore, an ideal type of conflict undergoes four intensity levels: peace, instability, violent conflict and war. Thus, the curve of conflict can indeed serve as an orientation for further heuristic enterprises in the (empirical) field of conflict analysis. However, its theoretical aspirations are rather reserved. In large part, Lund's conflict stages remain theoretical black boxes since there are no attempts to theoretically answer the questions of why/how the parties' escalating behaviour takes place. Also, although references to domestic conflict situations are given from time to time, the descriptive parts are overly fixated on the interstate context. In comparison to Lund, Ramsbotham et al.'s hourglass model is much more detailed with regard to its empirical account and the theoretical grounding behind, particularly concerning the stages of conflict formation (contradiction, polarisation etc.) (see Ramsbotham et al. 2011: 17–32).

Yet, the three models presented here reveal shortcomings concerning the equal status of the dimensions in Galtung's conflict triangle (attitude, behaviour, contradiction) that serves as a more or less explicit basis for their approaches. Most importantly, however, in the hourglass model as well as in the curve of conflict the idea of conflict escalation is very much interwoven with practical approaches to conflict resolution.[13] This is in part a result of the busy exchange and cooperation between theorists and practitioners that qualifies this broad field of research since its early days (Kriesberg 2009: 16–27). In contrast, bulding on the analytical essence of Galtung's conflict triangle, this contribution advocates for the idea of conceptually separating conflict analysis (i.e. understanding/reconstructing the dynamics of conflict escalation) and conflict resolution (understood as any approach of strategically intervening in conflict contexts). A good argument can be made that practical considerations about prompt intervention (not to say political projects) potentially block our analytical attention to conflict dynamics as such. Thus, linking analysis and praxis too closely involves the danger of favouring existing structures and, at the same time, of hindering innovative ideas, concepts and methods (that may suggest reframing existing structures/policies) to come up (Debiel et al. 2011: 330–331). This is not to say that the concept of conflict resolution is not worth being considered when analytically focussing on conflict escalation. As Ramsbotham et al. put it,

13 Of course, it would go way beyond the scope of this chapter (and this contribution as a whole) to provide a full account of the tremendous literature on conflict resolution, conflict management, or even peacekeeping and peacebuilding etc. For this, see e.g. Sandole et al. (2009), McLaughlin-Mitchell and Regan (2010), Kriesberg (2010), or Coleman et al. (2014).

> "conflict resolution is a more comprehensive term which implies that the deep-rooted sources of conflict are addressed and transformed." (Ramsbotham 2011: 31; italics added)

Hence, to develop adequate strategies of conflict resolution in a *second* step, any analysis of conflict escalation processes needs to be conducted in-depth in a *first* step. Seen from this angle, as it will be outlined in the next section, there are 'application-oriented' approaches in research on conflict escalation that take both steps into account.

2.3 Staking Overlapping Claims: Conflict Resolution, Conflict Transformation, and Conflict Escalation

Drawing on observations of analysts, diplomats, correspondents and peace workers, the field of conflict analysis and resolution is generally characterised by a close relation between praxis and theory (Byrne and Senehi 2009; Diez et al. 2011). In light of the empirical pertinence of armed conflict, scholars and practitioners engaged in conflict research are particularly interested in understanding the perpetuation and the intractability of deadly conflicts (Levinger 2013; Mitchell 2014: 45–62). Thus, intensifying (i.e. escalating) and mitigating (i.e. de-escalating) dynamics of conflicts are two sides of the same coin. From a PCS point of view, structures and processes that engender large-scale violence are of utmost interest. Consequently, research in the field of conflict resolution aims at understanding

> "how to bring actors back from the brink of war, how events shape their reading of history, how preferences held by one actor can be addressed within the confines of a competing set of preferences, and how information that is held closely by one can influence the expectations and behaviour of another" (McLaughlin Mitchell and Regan 2010: 1).

Based on that, conflict resolution develops "sets of ideas about avoiding, minimizing, and stopping violence that often is mutually destructive" and, naturally, lays great stress on the role of negotiation (e.g. track I-III diplomacy) and mediation (trust building measures, conciliatory gestures etc.) in order to transform destructive escalations into constructive ones (Cheldelin et al. 2008; Coleman et al. 2014).

In debates within the field of PCS, the contrasting juxtaposition of "conflict resolution" and "conflict transformation", the latter assumed to be more holistic and oriented to the longer-term, occupies a prominent place (Lederach 2003; Baros and Jaeger 2004: 228–233). Instead of appreciating both strands as distinct, conflict transformation is often portrayed as a subfield of the all-encompassing domain of conflict resolution (Ramsbotham et al. 2011: 7–10). Nonetheless, both conflict resolution and conflict transformation include a more or less ambitious and outspoken concept of conflict escalation. In other words, even though the bulk of concepts concentrate on the intervention-oriented resolution/transformation part, *conflict escalation* is a crucial (and sometimes rather hidden) building block in any of these approaches.

Appreciating 'conflict escalation' as a substantive concept

In order to back up the quality of conflict escalation as a substantive concept, the idea of conflict transformation, as introduced above, has to be addressed in greater detail. As it is argued here, conflict transformation is not simply another umbrella term for a set of theoretically informed techniques in dealing with social conflict practically (Ryan 2009; Mitchell 2014). Rather, it is a lens that enables observers to see more than an immediate issue-related contradiction but to envisage the overall meaning of a conflict as a long-term feature of social relationships. This perspective is deeply embedded in a tradition of considering conflict as normal in human relationships and, therefore, as an important driver of social change (see above Simmel 1992[1923] and Coser 1956). According to one of the key thinkers in the subfield, conflict transformation means

> "to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships" (Lederach 2003: 14).

Although rather reflecting the more practical and reactive aspects of the subject, Lederach's approach[14] extracts its ideas about the 'handling' of conflicts from an analytical and holistic view on conflict development in all its phases. Thus, starting from the very beginning of a given social contradiction, reconstructing drivers and, based on that, identifying transformers of conflict play a key role. Strictly speaking, any approach of conflict transformation is supposed to have an explicit idea of conflict escalation (and corresponding analytics) that serves as a starting point. Following Lederach and other founding figures in the field, the *Berghof Foundation*[15] provides a key reformulation of the concept of conflict transformation, which is defined as

> "a complex process of constructively changing relationships, attitudes, behaviours, interests and discourses in violence-prone conflict settings. It also addresses underlying structures, cultures and institutions that encourage and condition political and social conflict." (Berghof Foundation 2012: 23).

Based on that, the Berghof approach adds a further attribute: Thus, *systemic* conflict transformation includes the idea of understanding conflicts as systems that cannot be reduced to the properties of its elements. Instead, in each and every conflict, these

14 For another 'classical' approach laying the foundation of the concept of conflict transformation see for example Väyrynen (1991: 4) who provides a more analytical and theoretical version highlighting the social, economic and political dynamics in societies and therefore the fluid character of issues, actors and interests in the course of conflict.

15 The Berghof Foundation is a non-governmental and non-profit scientific institution "supporting conflict stakeholders and actors in their efforts to achieve sustainable peace" based in Berlin and Tübingen (see website at https://berghof-foundation.org, accessed November 18, 2022). Since it offers one of the most elaborated and far-reaching approaches in conflict transformation, the Berghof concept was exemplarily referred to in this chapter.

elements form a new composition that can be observed in relationships only (Ropers 2008: 21–22). Consequently, empirical approaches in systemic conflict transformation take up the cause of pursuing a multi-level and multi-actor relational perspective on social conflict. By introducing this kind of systemic thinking[16], the approach not only provides a starting point to grasp the complexity of conflict but also emphasises the non-linearity of conflict development that can be modelled only to a limited extent (Wils et al. 2006: 13–14). Based on a certain attitude of modesty, systemic conflict transformation can be described as a conceptually guided enterprise whose analytical focus lies on patterns of interaction and the dynamic of relationships.[17] Therefore, before thinking about intervening in a conflict by whatever means, this approach pleads in favour of reconstructing a conflict's transformations over time by equally considering views of the system as a whole ("bird's eye view") and detailed examinations of the subsystems ("frog's eye view") (Wils et al. 2006: 14). In other words, it acknowledges the empirical insight that contexts, actors, and issues are not given facts but changing components of a variable whole.[18] Methodically, systemic conflict transformation research mainly draws on qualitative tools based on empirical social research, including the evaluation of project reports, participatory monitoring, individual or group interviews, surveys, and ethnographic methods (Berghof Foundation 2012: 67–69; 108–109). While retrospectively mapping 'conflict escalation' in this way (although the term is not used literally), the approach enables observers to assess different stages of conflict development and thus to think of starting points for possible de-escalation strategies (see Reimann 2004: 43–46). In summary, it can be stated that systemic conflict transformation represents a far-reaching approach in current conflict research, which is addicted to practical application and experience to a great extent, but, at the same time, has a substantive analytical and theoretical understanding of conflict escalation as a separate part in a conflict's life cycle that deserves its own attention.

16 As it will be outlined in Chapter 3 and 4, the meaning of 'systemic' within the framework of "systemic conflict transformation" (e.g. by the Berghof Foundation 2012: 105–110) is not to be confused with its meaning in (Luhmannian) *systems* theory. While the former represents an attempt to reflect the complexity of social conflict and to develop multilayered practical measures to address this complexity, the latter implies no less than the ontological claim that the whole (social) world is constituted by communication and systems. Nevertheless, even though the conceptual and theoretical aspirations are much less marked in systemic conflict transformation, both approaches do have parallels that facilitate a common perspective on conflict escalation (see particularly Bernshausen and Bonacker 2011).

17 As far as the Berghof approach is concerned, case-related working hypotheses (e.g. on the dynamics of interpersonal/intergroup behaviours or the characteristics of asymmetrical/symmetrical conflict structures) are generated both by building on best practice in the field (by integrating field research, experiences of practitioners and narratives of conflict parties) and on conflict theoretical thought from various disciplines, e.g. political science, sociology and social psychology, history, anthropology, law, educational science (Berghof Foundation 2012: 66–67; 105–110).

18 As Miall (2013: 76–80) outlines, in this context, typical "transformations" of a conflict relate to, for example, changing constituencies of the parties to a conflict or to the de-and relinking of issues perceived as relevant to the conflict.

Conflict escalation and taxonomies: a (not so far) excursus

As it has been portrayed in the course of this chapter, conflict escalation, be it as an explicit focus or as a rather implicit topic between the lines, indeed represents a focal point in the vast field of conflict studies. Broadly speaking, based on a rich legacy in sociology, political science, and IR, on the one hand, there are rather theory-oriented approaches including a certain aspiration not only to contribute to practical strategies but also to promote theory development while dealing with the empirical performance of escalating conflicts (see the conflict transformation approach sketched above). On the other hand, there are elaborated empirical approaches aiming at advancing classical quantitative research in conflict studies by including qualitative elements within the scope of gathering and processing of conflict data. Against this background, the following section briefly addresses the *Heidelberg Conflict Model* as a well-known exponent of a sophisticated taxonomic model of conflict escalation.[19]

In comparative research on armed conflict and war in IR and PCS, global conflict databases play a crucial role (see e.g. UCDP mentioned above). Although those databases have considerably advanced in recent years, particularly concerning the scope of the empirical coverage and the accuracy of concepts and typologies, there are still substantial desiderata that keep research busy (Schwank et al. 2013: 33): First, non-violent periods of conflict or phases in which the level of violent incidences is very low are still not represented. In other words, in most databases, the perceived life cycle of a conflict and, hence, the registration of a conflict begins with the observation of organised collective violence and thus omits prior phases of conflict development. Second, based on the levels-of-analysis-problem mentioned earlier in this chapter, there is still a need for an integrative model that is able to represent what is traditionally (and artificially) referred to as different types of 'domestic' and 'international' conflict (e.g. concerning revolutions, coup d'états, terrorist attacks, civil wars, wars etc.) in the very same database. Following this, third, given the impetus to empirically 'typologise' conflict events, a conflict can indeed appear in various categories of a database since different phases of the very same conflict are 'counted' as different conflict types. Though, against the background of a conflict's changing characteristics over time, conflict databases are rather supposed to enable users to adopt a process perspective on the whole life cycle of a single conflict. Finally, in order to get a valid representation of conflict intensities, it has become increasingly obvious that conflict databases need to gather a lot more than just conflict-related deaths per year or month.[20]

19 The Heidelberg Conflict Model originates from the work of two conflict research facilities located at the University of Heidelberg/Germany: the *Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research* (HIIK) (since 1991) and the *Conflict Information and Analysis System* (CONIAS) Research Group (since 2005). Based on a common understanding of political conflict (see sections below), this model provides an elaborated scheme of classification for a wide range of conflict-related empirical phenomena according to their intensity or, in other words, it offers a taxonomy of conflict escalation that serves as a conceptual grounding for a comprehensive conflict database (see e.g. the *Conflict Barometer*, at https://hiik.de, accessed August 14, 2021).

20 On this, see e.g. UCDP's account on the Maidan protests, which is thoroughly concentrated on the gapless illustration of the number of violent incidences and deaths (UCDP 2020b). Conse-

In an effort to contribute to these desiderata and to overcome the fixation on quantitative concepts and methods in the field of conflict databases, the Heidelberg Conflict Model provides an approach that includes a "wide range of conflict manifestations, […] not only wars, but also violent conflicts far beneath the threshold of wars as well as completely non-violent conflicts." (CONIAS 2016a) In doing so, conflicts represent differences in positions (i.e. contradictions), which are understood as expressions of perceived incompatibilities of (world) views and interests.[21] Therefore, this understanding of conflict requires actors (individuals, social groups) who already act/ communicate with reference to a specific (conflict) issue. Based on that, data gathering and analyses within the framework of the this model concentrate on *political* conflicts, i.e. conflicts that are relevant for society as a whole since, as well as conflicts that give no reason to expect an institutionalised option of dealing with the dispute, and conflicts whose actors are perceived as important and assertive (see Schwank et al. 2013: 36–40).[22] Concerning its centrepiece, i.e. its account on different phases of conflict development, the Heidelberg approach provides a "dynamic intensity model" that distinguishes between five stages of conflict escalation whereas the respective intensity levels are determined by the quality of communication between actors. More precisely, conflict intensity (see levels 1 to 5 in graph below) is scaled according to the totality of the observed conflict-related measures in a geographical area within a given period of time (see CONIAS 2016b).

Table 2: Conflict Intensity Levels according to Heidelberg Conflict Model

1	**Dispute**	a political conflict, i.e. positional difference (see criteria above), holding out the prospect to threaten core state functions or the order of international law but without any use of organised collective violence	Non-Violent Conflict
2	**Non-Violent Crisis**	threat of organised collective violence (including e.g. an actor's refusal to disarm when demanded, the mutual pointing of weapons systems, or the implementation of sanctions)	

quently, the police forces' crackdown on Maidan protesters on November 30, 2013, represents its "first stated goal of incompatibility" (and hence the beginning of the conflict), although the contradiction between government and protesters gathered pace earlier (see case study details in chapter 5).

21 Partly, this understanding builds upon Galtung's idea of contradiction and Glasl's perspective on conflicts (see Chapter 2.2; Galtung 1996: 70–80; Glasl 1999: 16–19).

22 Against the backdrop of these criteria, the situation in Mali in the first months of the investigation period (November 2010 to August 2011) would not have been considered as a *political conflict* since the contradiction between the MNA (i.e. the political branch of the Touareg) and the Malian government in this period was considered as manageable within the existing institutions on all sides. At the same time, this period was de facto one of hardening of positions and growing rhetorical tensions (see case study details in Chapter 6).

3	**Violent Crisis**	classification procedure (intensity levels 3–5) depends on 5 indicators, which combine quantitative and qualitative criteria: weapons used, personnel/people involved, number of casualities, number of refugees, scope of destruction	Violent Conflict
4	**Limited War**		
5	**War**		

(Own table)

Indeed, as the annual *Conflict Barometer* demonstrates, the Heidelberg approach has brought out a highly developed and much-noticed conceptual model of conflict intensities, which points to further possibilities of refining conflict studies as a whole, particularly in terms of integrating quantitative and qualitative concepts and establishing global conflict databases. Even though this approach allows adopting a comparative perspective on conflicts at different stages of development retrospectively[23], there are substantial shortcomings that pave the way for further intruding desiderata: First, its understanding of political conflict[24] insinuates that, to be counted as such, a positional difference, at this point, already has to be perceived as relevant in society as a whole, including clearly defined actors/parties to the conflict. In other words, a crucial part of the overall process of conflict escalation, namely the question of how a contradiction gets relevant in a broader societal setting and how parties/identities to that contradiction gradually evolve (or emerge at all), remains beyond the scope of the model. Second, on the one hand, the model is able to portray conflicts in fine-grained stadia. On the other hand, it makes rather sparse proposals on how conflicts develop from one stadium to the next. To put it another way, the approach remains taxonomic inasmuch as it concentrates on refining the features of categories, classes, subtypes etc. to the disadvantage of dealing with the black box that marks the shift between the different conflict stages.

Beyond the Heidelberg approach briefly sketched above, there are several theoretically rather not ambitioned manners of using the concept of conflict escalation in more generic or typological contexts. In the following, one of these contexts, research on the "regionalisation of armed conflict" will be exemplarily outlined. To begin with, according to Lake and Rothchild (1998), collective fear represents one of the key mechanisms

23 As compared to the world's leading global conflict databases (e.g. ACLED, AKUF, COW, UCDP), the Heidelberg approach indeed offers solutions for the pressing desiderata in the field, particularly concerning the integration of different conflict types in a single database and the idea of portraying the very same conflict in different stages of its life cycle based on a wide range of qualitative features (Schwank et al. 2013: 51–57).

24 The Heidelberg approach conceptualises (political) conflicts as social systems based on communication. However, as the use of the concept suggests, conflicts are thought of in the framework of a sender-receiver-model of communication. Indeed, there is a focus on linguistic communication *and* physical action in a conflict context. At the same time, the constitution of actors and issues themselves is excluded from communication analyses. In sum, the Heidelberg approach does not apply a theoretically charged and comprehensive concept of communication and systems similar to Luhmannian thinking. This is the point where the present study's approach takes up the thread (see Chapter 3/4).

that drive the spread, i.e. diffusion and escalation, of "ethnic conflict". Therefore, "diffusion" stands for conflict phenomena in one area that alters the likelihood of conflict elsewhere (basically via information flows, e.g. changing beliefs about existing power contracts), while "escalation" occurs when a conflict in one country brings in new "foreign" belligerents (e.g. via alliances, spill overs, or irredentisms) (Lake and Rothchild 1998: 23–32).[25] Even though this approach sets a good example for a promising effort to empirically cope with the transnational dimension of (ethnic) conflict (and thus addresses the level-of-analysis-problem hinted at in Chapter 2.2), its interpretation of the process of spreading conflicts offers few starting points to push forward to critical discursive processes. That is to say, it does not seriously look behind the façade of the declared 'causal' conflict mechanisms of collective fear and the security dilemma in order to capture the phenomenon of conflict escalation in a broader societal context.

In the same vein, based on Lake and Rothchild's work and also Pugh et al.'s (2004) seminal study on "regional conflict complexes", recent research developed sophisticated empirical methods to analyse the geographical diffusion of an armed conflict to a new territory or the escalation of violence within the very same territory with the involvement of an increasing number of actors.[26] However, this research still adheres to a notion of escalation that does not significantly differ from an everyday 'faster-higher-further' understanding (i.e. more actors, more resources, and increasing violence). In addition, it concentrates on partial aspects of conflict development (here: the regionalisation of *already existing* internal wars) while the guiding threads of the larger story of how conflicts emerge remains widely unappreciated (see Ansorg 2014). In this sense, although the idea of "regional conflict systems"[27] represents a useful framework to transcend the more conventional conflict databases, it does not provide an innovative impulse to better understand processes of emerging conflict identities and, closely intertwined with this, the legitimisation of organised collective violence as a feature of social relationships.

2.4 Conflict Escalation in Social Science Discourses: Retaining the Key Points

Taken all together, Chapter 2 provides a concise panorama on conflict escalation in different but overlapping discourses in social sciences. The focus lies on the illustration of

25 In this context, Lake and Rothchild (1998: 24) point to the differentiation between horizontal escalation (concerning an increasing number of actors involved) and vertical escalation (concerning rising intensity levels of violence in conflict).

26 See e.g. the method of "multivalue qualitative comparative analysis" that was used within the framework of a comparative area study on 12 cases of "conflict systems" in sub-Saharan Africa from 1989 to 2010 (Ansorg 2014: 301–304).

27 As the definition exposes, the concept of regional conflict systems does not include (or hint at) any systems theoretical backing: "These systems are defined as geographically bound spaces of insecurity, ones that are characterized by interdependent armed conflicts in which a plurality of actors […] participate." (Ansorg 2014: 296). Moreover, the concept seems to be simply used as an auxiliary term to label a geographical intermediate unit that has not existed respectively been addressed in research before (see Ansorg 2014: 297).

those concepts, theories and empirical models that classify conflict escalation as a field of research in its own right. In this context, it becomes obvious that conflict escalation indeed occurs as a nominal topic in various approaches in conflict studies. At the same time, however, appropriate accounts with true theoretical aspirations, particularly dealing with the black box of how conflict escalation proceeds from one stage to the next are rather rare. Hence, so far, the answers to the overall research question of the present study – How do conflicts escalate? – that have been given in the above-cited strands of literature are, for now, not satisfying.

Nevertheless, in an effort to document the conceptual backstory of the approach to conflict escalation developed in the present work, a number of aspects can be retained from this chapter: In a nutshell, first, according to some of the most prominent intellectual forefathers in social sciences (Simmel, Coser, Dahrendorf), conflict escalation, here, too, is understood as a process of socialisation inasmuch as the emergence of conflict-related identities constitutes a crucial building block of a social conflict as such. Based on the idea of conflicts as ubiquitous and unavoidable phenomena, conflict escalation, rather than being a clearly measurable research issue, thus represents a genuine perspective in conflict studies that asks for how the many latent conflicts, or, in other words, the countless existing social contradictions, develop into manifest, i.e. socially visible and articulated conflicts.

Second, based on the rich theoretical and empirical history in political science and sociology, Pruitt and Rubin have called attention to "structural change" that conflicts bring about. In this sense, for example, the use of increasingly heavy means (e.g. from nonviolent protests to property damages) or the growing domination of devaluating attitudes towards the other (e.g. from political rivals to life-threatening enemies) are not just to be seen as conflict-related temporary occurrences but, at the same time, as both starting points and consequences of profound social change during conflict.

Third, Galtung's "conflict triangle", which defines conflicts as contradiction, attitude, and behaviour, provides a conceptual tool to relativise the level of analysis problem (particularly debated in IR) and thus to enable thinking of conflict escalation as a social phenomenon that can be intertwined with different societal levels at once (individuals, groups, or states). This, in turn, opens a useful perspective to meet both the empirical challenge of dealing with the obvious transnational dimension of many conflicts and the theoretical challenge of overcoming the fixation on the nation state as an absolute analytical reference.

Forth, as the focus on conflict escalation entails a certain orientation towards process perspectives, constructivist approaches in social sciences suggest an appropriate epistemological framework to ask 'how-possible-questions' about the interplay between structures, actors, and processes. Thereby, asking for how identities emerge and evolve, for example with reference to changing norms (about the legitimate use of violence) or perceptions (concerning power, security, etc.) lies at the very centre of conflict escalation.

Finally, as it can be learned from the above-cited conflict models (Glasl, Lund, Ramsbotham et al.) and comprehensive concepts (conflict resolution, conflict transformation), capturing social conflicts in their 'life cycles' represents a highly ambitioned enterprise. On the one hand, those indeed sophisticated approaches are very much informed by inductive research and thus provide far-reaching and detailed empirical insights (see par-

ticularly Glasl's nine-stage model). On the other hand, their theoretical depth seems to lag behind the high standard a comprehensive conflict theory is supposed to fulfil, especially when it comes to conceptually separate analytical methods (e.g. to figure out the changing tableau of conflict parties) from practical considerations about prompt intervention (e.g. concerning mediation efforts). However, although often not even literally mentioned, 'conflict escalation' represents a basic building block in conflict studies (see Berghof approach) and therefore, at least in this contribution, will be (re-) cultivated as a primarily analytical perspective on conflicts that should not be conceptually mixed up with intervention-oriented thinking in the first place. Admittedly, the highly elaborated taxonomies and typologies that came up with the large conflict databases can be an empirical orientation guide to make (comparative) sense of the manifold phenomena observed as conflict-related (see Heidelberg approach). Though, this does not suspend the necessity to develop a comprehensive approach that picks up the evident desiderata, notably the underrepresentation of pre-violent conflict escalation phases, meets the (meta-) theoretical requirements and definitely tackles the black boxes of conflict escalation left behind by research so far – a challenge that this study accepts by focussing on communication as the central building block of the social.