



## *Conclusion*

This book has grounded peace and conflict in concrete interactions and developed a micro-sociological lens that can be added to the methodological and theoretical toolbox of peace research. In a nutshell, the framework put forward in this book sheds light on micro-interactional and micro-social dynamics of peace and conflict. Throughout the book, I have shown how phenomena of violence, nonviolent resistance, conflict transformation, peace talks, and international meetings can be understood differently within this framework. Here, the book contributes with empirical insights about various cases from the Arab Uprisings to the Colombian peace process. With the aim of inspiring others to apply the micro-sociological framework, I have unfolded the methods and methodology of micro-sociology in peace research; in particular, how the video data analysis (VDA) method can contribute to capturing micro-interactional, rhythmic, and generative dynamics of world politics. In essence, this book makes three main arguments.

First, the book has illustrated how the micro-social logic of interbodily reciprocity and the tendency of falling into each other's bodily rhythms have profound implications for larger patterns of peace and conflict. In violence, micro-social logics make fighting difficult, because people tend to fall into each other's bodily rhythms; but the same tendency can make it equally difficult not to "attack back" when attacked. In nonviolent resistance campaigns, it is difficult for authorities to uphold domination and violence when offered gifts and other acts of fraternization. In conflict transformation, it is difficult to maintain enmity if engaging with people from the other side of the conflict under non-adversarial circumstances. In peace talks, it is difficult not to laugh at a joke in face-to-face interaction, even when the joke is made by an enemy. And in international meetings more broadly, it is difficult not to return a smile or an act of discredit.

Second, this book has emphasized the significance of energizing and de-energizing interactions and how they can generate social bonds or

tension, respectively. In nonviolent and violent conflicts alike, chains of energizing and de-energizing interactions shape the unity of each conflict party and whether parties in a conflict are energized to action or de-energized and discouraged. Hence, the chain of interactions shapes who develops momentum in a battle and ultimately who ends up winning. Boiled down to their symbolic meaning in terms of socio-emotional credit and discredit, words matter, but the book has shown how ritualistic interactions, regardless of the specific words being uttered, are equally critical. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the energizing factor of shouting “freedom” in the streets of Damascus was less about the semantics and more about the action of shouting with others in itself: “No matter what you shouted, you could shout “apples and carrots!” – you would still feel so fucking empowered” (Interview by author 2016). Even in peace talks, where the exchange of words is central, it is not just a question of words, but also the bodily copresence: spending time together and engaging in informal rituals of eating, smoking, or just bumping into each other in the hallway. In the words of a Syrian negotiator quoted in Chapter 6: “Peace talks are not talking, peace talks are so much else” (Interview by Hagemann and author 2020).

Third, I have referred to structure in different forms throughout the book, from structural violence and authoritarian rule to infrastructure for peace and the international system. The micro-sociological argument, as I see it, is *not* that structures of society do not exist. Quite the contrary, they are very real, enacted and generated in everyday practices across situations. Yet structures are not something over and above micro-interactions. Rather, structure is at once *composed of* and *more than* its parts just like a symphony is at once composed of and more than musicians. Moreover, not all parts have equal weight; some nodal points in the form of events, people, concepts, or material artifacts structure the social formations around them. This has implications for how peace and conflict can be investigated as sequences of micro-interactions, patterned interaction, or key events (but importantly does not rule out other approaches that treat structures in more abstract terms). Also, it has important implications for practices, for how authoritarian rule and structural violence can be disrupted in concrete situations, and how peace can be generated through concrete interactions thereby changing the nodes, however micro, of conflict or domination.

## Implications for Practice

Besides the theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions made in this book, the insights into micro-sociality and the proposed micro-sociological approach hold potential for policy and practice. Within structuralist and poststructuralist explanations, the discursive and institutional continuity of war (Jabri 1996) and invisible force of structural violence (Galtung 1996) seem almost impossible to change. Considering larger patterns of conflict and violence as composed of micro-interactions that can be challenged, disrupted, and transformed, the micro-sociological approach leaves greater room for transformation. Generating change in the larger web of interaction implies disrupting direct and structural violence and initiating attuned or low-intensity interaction rituals, for example through mediation or trade that can generate solidarity and supplement – or eventually substitute – conflictual interaction.

With nonviolent resistance, the oppressed can disrupt domination by refusing to obey orders, such as sitting in the back of the bus because of the color of their skin, engaging in everyday resistance and protest whereby they occupy public space and disrupt repression, such as by carrying out acts of fraternization or surprise (Chapter 4). The paradox, however, is that marginalized and dominated groups in society will be de-energized by the numerous domination rituals they are subjected to on an everyday basis – from micro-aggressions to unjust institutions and segregation. To be able to resist, disempowered groups can gather and engage in solidarity rituals that will generate the energy and solidarity needed to challenge domination and to practice everyday resistance and new forms of subjectivity. Hence, one should not underestimate the potential of even small groups to generate change, be they activists fighting Israeli occupation or women fighting patriarchal domination. Here, nodal points in the form of key events, charismatic individuals, symbolic artifacts, or central concepts and ideas can shape the new social formations practiced by nonviolent activists and serve to generate unity and shared focus.

When it comes to ending or avoiding wars, conflict transformation and peacebuilding imply that parties come together, both at the elite level through peace talks and at local levels through Tracks 2 and 3 diplomacy, people-to-people activities, and reconciliation efforts (Chapters 5, 6, and 7). This book has analyzed dialogical and

diplomatic encounters from people-to-people meetings to peace talks and international meetings, essentially looking for the same thing: how participants can engage in focused, engaged, rhythmic, and intense interaction generating social bonds across conflict divides, but also how such meetings can reflect or reinforce power dynamics of domination – or fall flat. Much dialogue literature would emphasize the increased understanding that participants in dialogue and reconciliation activities can gain when listening to the stories of the other side as the main aim. Hence, the content that is being conveyed in the stories and the (cognitive) understanding thereof is the focus (e.g., Ron and Maoz 2013; Sternberg et al. 2018). A micro-sociological take would instead argue that this increased understanding is but one dimension of dialogical interaction. Another important dimension is the ritual itself, the intense focus that active listening entails, the social-bond-generating interaction that derives from participants asking questions rather than uttering accusations, and the transformative effect of participants laughing together. Hence, the change in relationship is not only cognitively deriving from a changed perception of the other based on new knowledge of their situation, but also bodily and emotional change emerging from engaging in energizing rituals. People working with or having participated in dialogue, reconciliation, or mediation activities would often know this; but they would not necessarily have the vocabulary to express it. Micro-sociology provides such vocabulary and framework. Mediators, dialogue facilitators, and peacemakers alike may be able to further develop insights about momentum, micro-sociality, and energizing rituals into their work on bringing conflicting parties together in various ways (Bramsen et al. 2019).

Appreciating the dynamic and interactional nature of conflict, domination, violence, and peace, this book presents a somewhat optimistic account. Authoritarian regimes are not portrayed as Greek temples with pillars of support that must fall one by one for the regime to be overthrown but rather as a musical ensemble with tight coordination and domination rituals that can be challenged to shake the power of a regime. Conflict is not a solid tree to be taken by the roots, but rather a system of rhizomes with intense no-no interactions that can be transformed. Violence is not an inherent part of human nature, but rather a (difficult) dance-like ritual that can be disrupted. Peace is not something abstract or utopian, but rather emerging in concrete interaction. However, the book has hopefully also conveyed the inherently

complex and self-reinforcing nature of conflict and violence, making it highly difficult to change. Moving from war to peace is an inherently challenging, vulnerable, and fragile process implying change in multiple patterns of interaction at multiple layers of society. Staying within the realm of substituting metaphors in traditional peace research, the book challenges the Galtungian conception of the mediator or peace researcher as a doctor capable of curing conflicts; at best, mediators can function as a midwife, assisting the conflict transformation process.

### **Ways Forward**

This book has moved from the crowded streets of Bahrain to the high circles of global diplomacy; from violence and war to conflict transformation and peace talks. Yet the topics covered are in no way exhaustive. There is plenty of room for other researchers and students to further explore what the micro-sociological lenses can bring to the study of peace, conflict, and international politics. In fact, the main purpose of the book is not primarily to report on research findings but to inspire further research. A growing number of dialogical, violent, diplomatic, and conflictual situations are recorded by traditional media and ordinary people with smart phones. The potential of applying video data to understand the dynamics and developments of peace, violence, nonviolence, and conflict is therefore only increasing, with great potential for future research.

One dimension to explore further in future research is the long-term significance of diplomatic meetings in terms of their energizing/de-energizing potential. As we saw in Chapter 4 on nonviolent resistance, whether chains of interaction are energizing or not can be critical for the overall development of a conflict. In the diplomatic cases analyzed in this book, the primary focus has been in situ effects of, for example, domination; that is, whether a diplomat is able to establish domination in a particular situation to get their will or appear as superior to the public. Future research could further explore the long-term effects of not only developing social bonds in diplomatic meetings (Chapters 6 and 7) but also the long-term effects of energizing or de-energizing meetings. This is difficult to assess, as diplomats engage in numerous interactions with numerous people – and even if they are de-energized in one diplomatic situation, they may be energized in many others. One could however study the long-term effects of, for example, indigenous

people or women being repeatedly (subtly) dominated in diplomatic meetings and the long-term effects of this in terms of inequality and power. A related research avenue is to investigate larger peacebuilding processes in terms of energizing and de-energizing interaction, mapping out how post-agreement activities energize or de-energize participants and how this shapes the overall trajectory of the peace process. In this way, future research could shed light on how words on a piece of paper in the form of a peace agreement are implemented and restructure everyday practices and interactions across societies.

International conflict offers another focus area for future research. With the decline in international warfare since the end of the Cold War, peace research shifted focus to civil wars (Gleditsch et al. 2014). While civil wars remain relevant, the emerging rivalry between the United States and China (Allison 2017), together with the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, requires that peace research must (re)focus on conflicts, peacemaking, and relations between states. The choice in this book to also focus on international meetings is guided by a logic of increasingly focusing on interactions between (representatives of) states rather than merely within states. Future research could further apply the micro-sociological framework to analyze international conflicts and how not only international meetings but all kinds of other encounters and interactions (physical and nonphysical) shape the course of conflict. This would for example imply analyzing video recordings of the speeches, mourning rituals, and attacks in detail as well as conducting interviews with officials, activists, and fighters about the unfolding of events.

Besides empirical studies, future research could theorize how international relations can be re-theorized in light of micro-sociological insights into human interaction. As argued by Wallensteen (2011a, 14), peace research was founded as a critique of realism with a continuous aim “to logically challenge and empirically examine whether Machiavellian ideas are in fact founded in reality: are realists realistic or is this only what the thinkers think they are?” Continuing this tradition, the micro-sociological insights illustrated in this book challenge Hobbesian, realist assumptions about human beings as inherently egoistic in need for a Leviathan not to have a war of all against all (Hobbes 1651). Violence is difficult to conduct and goes against our body-emotional entrainment with others. Humans can fall into rhythms of conflictual interaction and/or domination, but these are

part of the inherently social, inter-bodily co-being and not expressions of an inherently egoistic or violent nature. From a micro-sociological perspective, one might argue that the problem of international relations is not the anarchic nature of the international systems, as the realists would put it, but more so *distance*. The core issue in global politics is not that there is no overall world government preventing wars but rather that violence is made possible by weapons capable of attacking from afar; and since social bonds are generated in concrete, engaged interaction, the absence of physical meetings between world leaders or limited contact between different national, ethnic, or religious groups, is problematic. Hence, future research could further develop a theory of international relations drawing on micro-sociological insights. Such “re-theorization” of the international system could also take into account the social logics of exchanging and transferring socioemotional credit and discredit between states, hence grasping the socioemotional economy of international relations.

This book merely constitutes some baby steps down the research avenue toward analyzing peace and conflict in micro-situational detail. My hope is that the framework developed in the book will be useful and inspirational for students and researchers to further investigate peace processes, conflict escalation, and diplomatic rapprochement; and how they develop through energizing, de-energizing, and social-bond-generating micro-interactions.