Role of Ethics in Conflict Negotiation: A Narrative Review



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DOI: https://doi.org/10.3126/japfcsc.v8i1.77598

Article History:

Received: 4 January 2025 Accepted: 19 March 2025 Published: 20 April 2025

Keywords:

Ethics, conflict, negotiation, sustainability, inclusion and justice

To cite this article:

Aryal, R. (2025). Role of ethics in conflict negotiation: A narrative review. *Journal of APF Command and Staff College*, 8(1), 1-16, https://doi.org/10.3126/japfcsc.v8i1.77598

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.3126/japfcsc. v8i1.77598

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Abstract

Conflict is a pervasive feature of human interaction, emerging from unmet needs like security and recognition, often fueling disputes over resources and power. Negotiation is widely recognized as an effective tool for conflict resolution, yet its success varies, prompting scrutiny of its ethical dimensions. This paper aims to explore the role of ethics in conflict negotiation, seeking to understand how ethical principles enhance sustainability, justice, and inclusion in peace processes, and to propose a synthesis of realist and idealist approaches for enduring resolutions. Employing a qualitative, exploratory approach, the study conducts a narrative review of secondary sources, including scholarly articles and philosophical texts, accessed via desktop research. Thematic synthesis to justify key ethical elements influencing negotiation outcomes. The realism offers a pragmatic negotiation framework, addressing procedural needs and power dynamics, but lacks depth for lasting peace without ethical grounding. Idealism, emphasizing moral values, complements this by fostering sustainability, justice, and inclusion as sufficient conditions. The ethical leadership mitigate conflict recurrence by utilizing

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the ethics in negotiation and decision making. A balanced integration of realist procedure and idealist ethics, guided by skilled negotiators, is essential for equitable, sustainable peace. This study provides a conceptual framework, underscoring ethics as a cornerstone of effective conflict negotiation, with implications for future research and practice.

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon inherent in every social setting and cannot be entirely avoided. It originates in the human mind, which processes information through independent reasoning, shaped by diverse ideas, desires, and needs. According to Wilmot and Hocker (2001; in Hussein & Al-Mamary, 2019), conflict is generally defined as an antagonistic state of opposition, disagreement, or incompatibility between two or more parties. Conflict negotiation involves resolving disputes through different strategies and peaceful means for managing and resolving conflicts. This process is not just a reaction to tension but a critical component of social dynamics, serving as a mechanism to manage and resolve disputes that arise from differing goals, values, and interests among individuals or groups. Effective negotiation processes are essential for achieving social objectives and maintaining positive relationships between parties (Hussein & Al-Mamary, 2019). The studies have shown that negotiation is an effective, efficient process to resolve conflict where the conflicting parties engage in dialogue on issues of mutual concern (Bello, 2017). There is a popular saying of US President John F. Kennedy: "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate". It justifies that negotiation is the only way out to resolve perceived conflict, offering a pathway to harmony that transcends mere avoidance of confrontation and fosters constructive engagement across diverse contexts.

Although conflict is often perceived as a barrier to harmony and progress, it also functions as a generative force stimulating critical thinking, innovation, and the emergence of new practices. In this way, conflict is not merely a sign of dysfunction but a dynamic component of societal development, pushing communities to adapt and evolve. Negotiations involve a series of stages, including preparation, establishing contacts, discussion, reaching an agreement, and evaluating results, which are crucial for resolving conflicts constructively and enhancing decision-making processes (Kasianenko, 2024). Fisher (2011) further justifies that negotiation is critical for building trust and establishing the foundation for long-term peace, a process that requires patience and commitment. Therefore, the negotiation process must emphasize rationality, justice, transparency, sustainability, participation, accountability, equality, and equity to ensure lasting and fair

results (Ralchev, 2023; Espinoza & Velasco, 2019). In the social context, the balance of power in negotiations can be skewed, with one party being more powerful and influential, shaping the outcome, or the other party potentially lacking the knowledge to make a rational decision (Ralchev, 2023). At the same time, negotiators consciously want to build trust and act ethically, they fear that their counterparts won't behave the same way (Espinoza & Velasco, 2019). This tension highlights an acute need for the intervention of ethical principles and practices, ensuring that negotiations prioritize fairness and inclusivity over short-term gains, thus securing peace that endures beyond immediate agreements.

Similarly, negotiators take advantage of their counterparts and may portray questionable or unethical behavior in negotiations (Shapiro, 2005; Coleman, 2014; in Espinoza & Velasco, 2019). In fact, many studies have reported biased, questionable, and unethical behaviors in the negotiation process (Shapiro, 2005; Coleman, 2014), suggesting that bad practices are not limited only to one counterpart, but both parties sometimes seek to yield favorable results on their side. On the other hand, negotiators consciously want to build trust and act ethically, they might fear that their counterparts won't behave the same way Folger et al. (2021). In both cases, the result is often unsustainable, leading to new conflicts as a byproduct of initial conflict negotiation. These recurring issues stem from a lack of ethical grounding, where power plays overshadow mutual benefit. This paper aims to explore the role of ethics in conflict negotiation, seeking to understand how ethical principles enhance sustainability, justice, and inclusion in peace processes, and to propose a synthesis of realist and idealist approaches for enduring resolutions.

Review of Literature

A literature review is an excellent way of synthesizing research findings to show evidence on a meta-level and to uncover areas in which more research is needed, is a critical component of creating theoretical frameworks and building conceptual models (Snyder, 2019). Review is defined as 'to view, inspect, or examiner second time or again' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2008; Grant & Booth, 2009, pp. 92, 107; in Kunwar, 2020, p.140).

The two standard types of reviews are (a) systematic (SR) and (b) no-systematic or narrative review (NR). NRs are aimed at identifying and summarizing what has been previously published, avoiding duplications, and seeking new study areas no at address (Derish & Annesley, 2011; Grant, & Booth, 2009; Ferrari, 2015).

Scholars have defined conflict in diverse ways, reflecting its multidimensional nature across fields, yet a consensus emerges that it involves incompatibility, opposition, or

interference between individuals or groups. Coser (1956) underlines a struggle over scarce resources, status, and power, presenting conflict as an inherent and perhaps necessary element of social interaction. Similarly, Deutsch (1973) looks at conflict as a situation where people get in each other's way and stop each other from reaching their goals, while Wall (1985) extends this by framing conflict as an attempt to frustrate others' goals, caused by interdependence, differences in goals, and perceptions, thus bringing a psychological lens to the structural base. Conrad (1991) and Folger et al. (2021) take a communicative approach, defining conflict as arising through interdependent interactions where interests are perceived to be incompatible or in tension, spotlighting the role of communication in both escalating and resolving conflict. Glasl (2011) brings a subjective and psychological dimension, defining conflict as an interaction where the parties/stakeholders sense incompatibilities in thoughts, perceptions, or emotions. At this point, all these definitions share common ground in recognizing incompatibility and interdependence, they diverge in terms of focus—some emphasizing structural and material causes, others prioritizing perception, strategy, or communication.

Conflict exhibits across geopolitical, social, economic, and environmental dimensions, each influencing and exacerbating the others. Conflicts are often rooted in power dynamics and resource control, which can lead to prolonged conflicts if not addressed timely (Chisadza et al., 2019). Realists perceive conflict as an inevitable facet of human existence, stemming from competition for resources and power (Morgenthau, 1948). Within this paradigm, negotiation serves as a tool to manage and balance these competing interests, with the realism perspective focusing on the practical aspect of conflict resolution, where negotiation is used to address and balance competing interests. Olekalns (2015) has addressed such issues as the power dynamics play a major role to bring the conflict into a rational end, noting that conflicts require reestablishing trust and communication before addressing substantive issues, asserting the role of the negotiator and his ethical background.

Negotiation emerges as a key mechanism for conflict resolution, supported by various theoretical models. The game theory uses a mathematical model to analyze strategic interactions between parties, assuming that individuals are rational actors who seek to maximize their payoffs (Schelling, 1980). This theory provides tools for analyzing and predicting the behavior of conflicting parties standing on the realist's philosophy, helping negotiators develop strategies that can lead to mutually beneficial agreements. However,

despite theoretical models suggesting that rational agents will always reach a negotiated solution, real-world negotiations can fail due to disagreements on the game's configuration and manipulation of the bargaining structure, leading to persistent conflicts (Kivimäki, 2024). Principled Negotiation, developed by the Harvard Negotiation Project, advocates for separating people from the problem, focusing on interests rather than positions, and using objective criteria to reach an agreement, encouraging negotiators to seek integrative solutions that address the concerns of all involved, promoting more durable and satisfactory outcomes (Fisher et al., 1991). The expansion of negotiation approaches emphasizes the importance of various nonpolitical entities in conflict resolution, enhancing understanding and cooperation among diverse stakeholders involved in conflicts (Leiner, 2018).

Communication is central to negotiation efficacy. Scholars and writers have explicitly highlighted the importance of communication, interaction, involvement of the parties, agreements, negotiation, and the role of negotiators in the conflict situation (Morgenthau, 1948; Conrad, 1991; Glasl, 2011; Folger et al., 2021; Chisadza et al., 2019), justifying that communication plays a pivotal role in negotiations, functioning as a structural and interactional variable that influences the nature and outcomes of conflicts by facilitating understanding and cooperation among parties (Putnam & Poole, 2024). Effective negotiation often hinges on the ability to foster relationships and resolve conflicts, necessitating skilled communication and sincerity from all parties involved (Flynn & Freiberg, 2018; Zhang, 2024).

Ethical considerations increasingly shape negotiation discourse. Amaral (2018) has justified the statement of Fisher et al. (1991), by elaborating that effective negotiation hinges on political inclusivity, civil society engagement, and public transparency throughout the process to yield a winning statement, with these three pertinent issues as prerequisites of the sustainability of the decisions. Aryal (2024) justifies sustainability as an outcome of fairness and justice in decision-making backed by moral and ethical principles, meaning sustainability fosters a people-centric approach with justice and inclusion in the process to fulfill the sufficient condition in conflict negotiation. These approaches suggest that ethical considerations should guide the conflict resolution process, ensuring that outcomes align with fundamental human rights, justice, and sustainability (Foucault, 1997; Harman, 1975; Plato, 1992; Aristotle, 1999). Lee and Mac (2012), Amaral (2018), and Khadiagala (2002) contend that peace negotiation benefits from less secretive and more inclusive negotiation processes, which enhance political support, civic mobilization, and community engagement

at every stage of the peace process. Narrowing down the literature of negotiation "civic mobilization," "community engagement," "inclusivity," "sustainability," "integration," "civil society engagement," "public transparency" portrays the scope of ethical and moral principles in the conflict negotiation process.

Philosophers provide a moral framework for negotiation. Plato (1992) initially argued about ethical and moral principles, stating that virtues like justice, goodness, and truth exist as ideal forms that guide ethical behavior, with ethical knowledge derived from understanding and aligning with these higher ideals. Kant (1998) posits that ethical actions must adhere to universal maxims that respect the intrinsic dignity of individuals, asserting an idealist approach where moral obligations are dictated by rationality and inherent moral duty, not subjective preferences or external outcomes. Mill (1879) views moral philosophy as one of the grand philosophies, arguing that morality is necessary for any action undertaken by individuals in positions of authority to justify the real value of their roles. It clarifies that the "individual in position of authority" specifies the negotiator involved in the negotiation process, who ought to follow and adhere to the baseline principles of ethics and morality to yield sustainable, justiciable, and inclusive decision-making (Mill, 1879).

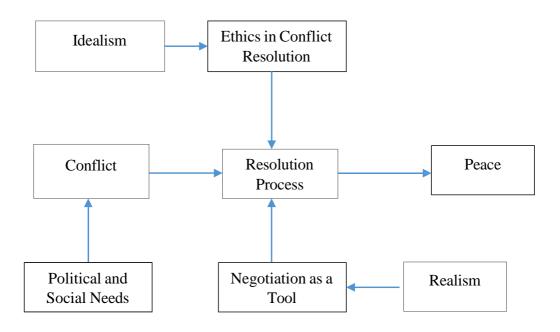
Existing literature acknowledges the importance of ethics in conflict negotiation, yet it fails to clearly explain how and why ethical concerns are pertinent to the negotiation process. Furthermore, it does not establish the interrelationship between idealism and realism, both of which play significant roles in achieving sustainable conflict resolution. But, they couldn't present why to entangle ethical principles into the decision-making process and why to inject sustainability to yield people-centric results. Therefore, it is important to understand the dynamic interplay between conflict and conflict negotiation through the lens of ethical principles. This inquiry is essential to justify the theoretical interrelationship between these constructs, offering a foundation for further exploration.

Conceptual Framework: Integrating Ethics and Negotiation

The importance of trust and respect between dance partners cannot be underestimated. These elements ensure the partners remain in sync and avoid missteps in their dance performance. Similarly, ethics in negotiations ensure that the process is fair and respectful, building trust and potentially a long-term relationship (Watkins, 2024). Conceptual framework reflects the fact that the structural characteristics can be thought of as the "context" established by the researcher (Mattke et al., 2014). Following conceptual framework is an outcome of the review of various literatures.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Source: Adapted and modified from Caputo (2019)

The conceptual framework outlined in the diagram illustrates the interplay between conflict resolution and various philosophical and practical methodologies. Conflicts arise from unmet basic human needs such as security, identity, and recognition which often manifest as political and social demands (Burton, 1990). Human needs theories like Maslow's Need Hierarchy theory, propose that all humans have certain basic universal needs and that when these need are not met conflict is likely to occur. Human needs theorists distinguish between human needs and interests, and argue that human conflicts emerge when people's efforts to meet their fundamental needs are frustrated. It is further argued that conflict and even violence are inevitable because human needs are non-negotiable (Danesh, 2011). It posits that effective conflict resolution must address these underlying needs, not just surface-level issues, to reduce the likelihood of future disputes and achieve lasting peace.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research method, employing an exploratory and descriptive design to investigate the role of ethics in conflict negotiation. The study relies on the narrative research to synthesize the qualitative data from theories, philosophies and prior studies. The data has been collected through desktop research. Desktop research is the review of previous research findings to gain a broad understanding and gain more in-depth insight (Travis, 2022; Moodly & Naidoo, 2022; in Aryal, 2024). The presented data were analyzed using thematic synthesis as a tool of analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The narrative review reveals that ethics play a foundational role in shaping the processes and outcomes of conflict negotiation. Ethical principles such as fairness, honesty, respect, and impartiality are frequently emphasized in negotiation. The inclusion of ethical considerations often mitigates the risk of power imbalances and manipulation during negotiations. The interplay of ethics and conflict negotiation necessitates a nuanced understanding of how moral principles intersect with pragmatic realities.

Role of Ethics in Conflict Negotiation

Conflict negotiation plays a pivotal role in achieving peace, yet it is a complex and protracted process that demands more than just a series of tools or strategies. Negotiation requires sustained, sincere efforts, an enabling environment, and the requisite knowledge and skills to be successful (Saunders, 1996). Restoring peace in a conflict-ridden country is a formidable challenge, as highlighted by Uyangoda (2003). This complexity underscores the diverse contexts in which negotiations unfold. Saunders (1996) points out that effective negotiation starts long before the beginning of the formal talks, involving preparatory tasks aimed at nurturing and sustaining peace efforts.

An effective negotiation process begins with building trust and confidence, engaging all stakeholders, and demonstrating unwavering commitment from both parties. It further requires extensive informal consultations, open debates on contentious issues, and a focus on collaborative problem-solving (Upreti, 2006). However, Aquino (1998); Adler (2007); and Hinshaw (2013) argue that unethical behavior and deception often occur in negotiation, and such behavior is almost unavoidable in conflict negotiation. Strudler (1995) highlights that "the bargaining opponent's perception of one's reservation price serves to anchor the expectations of the negotiation's outcomes," illustrating the strategic use of deception. Provis (2000) similarly states that deceptive behavior in negotiation has become an ethical practice, embedded in the process.

McGill (1968) adds that when important moral issues cannot be fully resolved with current knowledge or agreed upon by all parties, decisions must still be made. In these cases, the best policies emerge through negotiation and compromise, considering the likelihood of shared interests. Banai et al. (2014) found through a survey of 298 participants that personal differences strongly influence how negotiators judge the morality of unclear tactics and shape their intentions to act. This finding also varies depending on the context of the negotiation.

These considerations align with the tenets of realism, a philosophy that underscores the belief that power and self-interest drive human behavior and international relations. Realism views negotiation as a pragmatic mechanism to navigate power dynamics and self-interest. Realists often perceive negotiation as a zero-sum game where the stronger party holds greater leverage, yet they acknowledge negotiation's necessity for achieving peace (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979; Kant, 1998). Realism rejects the idealist notion that only ideas are real, and asserts that tangible, material realities, such as sticks, stones, and trees, laws, processes, procedures exist regardless of human perception. Realists focus on solving existing social problems through a problem-solving process, emphasizing proper steps and requirements to find solutions (Ibrahim et al., 2019).

Despite meeting the procedural requirements of an ideal negotiation process, realism alone fails to guarantee lasting peace. Its focus on power and pragmatism often overlooks critical elements such as sustainability, justice, and the people-centric nature of society. Analyzing negotiation through necessary and sufficient conditions reveals that while the realist approach is necessary for peace, it is not sufficient for lasting peace. A synthesis of both realist and idealist approaches is crucial for successful conflict resolution.

While realists identify the root causes of social problems and propose methods to address them, idealists enhance these processes by applying ethical principles that promote sustainability, justice, and inclusion. Harman (1975) and Krausz (2010) argue that ethical relativism suggests that moral values and judgments depend on cultural, social, or individual contexts. This perspective introduces flexibility in ethical decision-making, recognizing the dynamic nature of society.

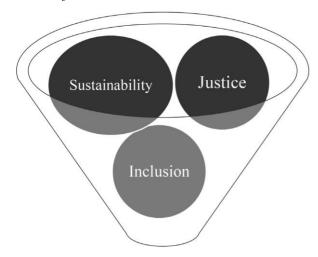
The Idealist perspective emphasizes that conflict negotiation tools alone are insufficient for achieving lasting peace (Banai et al., 2014). Instead, ethical principles are essential throughout the peace negotiation process (Adler, 2007; Hinshaw, 2013). A practical approach to negotiation, when combined with ethical considerations, ensures a peace that is sustainable, just, and inclusive. Without fulfilling the necessary ethical conditions, lasting peace cannot be achieved.

Ethics in Conflict Negotiation: The Essential Constructs

An examination of the ethics of negotiation therefore requires an embracing of different conditions in a complex environment which does not always offer singular solutions, instead there are multiple prerequisites of ethics depending on the route by which they are reached (Sherwood, 2023). The Figure 1 provides a synopsis of the ethical required, derived from the different literature review.

Figure 2

Elements of Ethics



Source: Adapted and modified from Kul (2024)

The figure 1 represents the interdependence of sustainability, justice, and inclusion in conflict negotiation. The funnel-like structure with three core constructs indicates that ethics in conflict negotiation depends on the pillars of inclusion, sustainability, and justice. Ethics, as a discipline, is concerned with determining what is morally good or bad and right or wrong. Justice, as a principle, demands more than legal agreements; it calls for redress of historical wrongs and the rectification of structural inequalities, it further says, the law alone, as a set of promulgated rules crafted by legitimate authorities, is insufficient (Xhemajli, 2021) to deliver the peace. Similarly, true sustainability goes beyond procedural success, long-term well-being of all stakeholders (Waldman & Siegel, 2008), efficiency and effectiveness of the decision making (Daudu & Dube, 2017), impact on the environment and society, ownership (Mumba, 2015), requiring a commitment to long-term equitable outcomes (Lie et al., 2007). Inclusion, likewise, mandates participation and proportionality in the distribution of justice and resources (Rausch & Luu, 2017). This principle stresses that moral actions must consider the broader implications for all affected, rather than

focusing solely on individual outcomes (Mill, 1879). By prioritizing these moral values, the resolution process aims to produce just and equitable results (Aryal, 2024).

The realist approach provides a practical framework for negotiation, emphasizing the importance of addressing power dynamics and practical concerns. However, this approach must be complemented by ethical principles to ensure a holistic and enduring peace. A balance of both realism and idealism helps mitigate the risks of opposing outcomes and ideological divides, ensuring the resolution process is both effective and just.

Role of Ethics: A Balanced Synthesis of Realism and Idealism

Kant (1998) argues that mental faculties such as intelligence, wit, and judgment, along with virtues like courage, determination, and perseverance, are valuable and desirable. However, these faculties can become harmful if not guided by a morally sound character. Derrida (1995) explores the complexities of ethical responsibility and the contradictions inherent in moral decisions, particularly the concept of sacrifice, revealing the uncertainties within ethical life. This suggests that ethical principles have limitations and cannot be relied upon solely in peace negotiations.

Supporting this nuanced view, ethics extends beyond normative principles or normative ethics. Meta-ethics questions the nature and meaning of moral judgments, while applied ethics addresses practical, real-life issues (Lee & Mac, 2012; Kant, 1998). Ethics in conflict negotiation, therefore, is not merely about adhering to rigid principles but must also account for the practical realities of negotiation and the changing dynamics of society.

From a realist perspective, negotiation serves as a pragmatic tool for attaining peace, adhering to legal requirements and aiming to secure optimal outcomes for all parties involved. The peace process involves multiple stages: conflict analysis, ceasefire agreements, negotiation, peace agreements, Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration (DDR), Security Sector Reform (SSR), reconciliation efforts, post-conflict reconstruction, monitoring, and validation. Negotiation is central to each of these stages. However, while realists fulfill the necessary conditions for peace by focusing on procedural aspects, they fail to ensure sufficient conditions, as this approach proves inadequate in isolation. The idealist approach emphasizes the importance of sustainability, justice, and inclusion as essential components of enduring peace. For instance, enrolling children in a premier educational institution is necessary, but without concurrent moral education, it is insufficient for their holistic development. Effective conflict negotiation, driven by ethical leadership, prioritizes sustainability, fairness, justice, equity, and long-term development (Aryal, 2024). Ethical leaders consider both immediate concerns and long-term implications for the community and the nation.

Conclusion

Conflict negotiation serves as the cornerstone of the peace process, with the quality of preparation and execution directly foreshadowing the outcome. Consequently, negotiation must be prioritized within this framework. Merely adhering to legal requirements and fulfilling the procedural aspects of conflict negotiation is insufficient; achieving sustainable peace demands the integration of sustainability, justice, and inclusiveness in decision-making. Negotiation fundamentally revolves around the decisions made by the involved parties, and rational, ethically grounded choices are essential for fostering enduring peace in society. A balanced synthesis of idealism and realism offers the most effective approach to realizing the shared objectives of both parties. Idealism contributes ethical depth, emphasizing moral values such as justice and inclusivity, while realism provides a pragmatic foundation, ensuring that negotiations address practical needs and power dynamics. This blended strategy enhances the likelihood of a robust, lasting resolution by aligning procedural rigor with a commitment to equitable, justiciable and sustainable outcomes.

Author Introduction

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