

# The micro-dynamics of peace and conflict

Security Dialogue

2024, Vol. 55(5) 443–461

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DOI: 10.1177/09670106241269753

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## Abstract

The study of micro-dynamics has grown over the last two decades, emerging now as a mainstay in research on peace and conflict. The focus on micro-dynamics, and other micro-level approaches, challenges the primacy of state-centric research. Yet despite the growing literature around the micro-dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding, the term remains opaque. Its use has evolved beyond a sweeping indicator for 'subnational', yet the field of study has seen limited development of the definitional parameters of the term and why the term retains utility. In this article we explore the deployment of the concept in distinct literatures, provide a working definition, and assess its application to the study of peace and conflict. We argue that micro-dynamics are simultaneously a unit of analysis, a social phenomenon and a sense-making tool for understanding human relations in the broader societal ecosystem. We contend that a micro-dynamics approach contributes to peace and conflict studies, offering insight into how individuals get on with their lives in conflict-affected areas. By providing multilayered insights of complex scenarios based upon thick, empirically led inductive analysis, the micro-dynamics lens generates a granular understanding of (i) how individuals and groups live and perceive boundaries and (ii) the shifting and malleable nature of inter- and intragroup relations in conflict-affected societies. A micro-dynamics lens, moreover, evidences (iii) the interconnected nature of the micro- and other scalar levels of analysis, elucidating understanding of what we characterize as the peace and conflict ecosystem.

## Keywords

Conflict, micro-dynamics, peacebuilding, peacemaking, post-accord, violence

## Introduction

The term micro- has been attached to a progressively extensive range of concepts across the social sciences, such as micro-processes, micro-ecologies, micro-dynamics, micro-foundational, micro-politics,

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and micro-level. Despite common usage across fields as diverse as politics, international relations, sociology, human geography, management studies, psychology and economics, no consensus exists over the definition of the micro- and how the term qualifies its suffix (Doise, 1988; Pettigrew, 1996). Existing breadth of meaning is understandable, given the diversity of fields within which the micro- is deployed. This article contributes specifically to discussions over how the concept of micro-dynamics might be situated and employed within the subdiscipline of peace and conflict studies.

In recent decades, research in peace and conflict studies has made significant contributions to our understanding of the meaning and consequence of the everyday agency asserted by civilians during conflict (Arjona, 2014; Bencherif et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2022; Kalyvas, 2003, 2008, 2012a, 2012b) and in its wake (Brett, 2022; Mac Ginty, 2014; Voyvodic, 2021). Scholarship on the local turn (Julian et al., 2019; Richmond et al., 2015) and research focusing on the everyday (Berents, 2015; Mac Ginty, 2014) have similarly provided important insights, focusing on units and levels of analysis other than the state in conflict-affected societies. Relatedly, recent research has advanced our understanding of how communities experience conflict and its legacy and perceive security and peace in the wake of war (De Coning, 2018) and how the intersectional and gendered nature of peace and conflict shape lives at the local level (McLeod & O'Reilly, 2019). Further scholarship has explored the malleability or rigidity of identity categories (Bar-Tal, 2006) in the aftermath of episodes of political violence and how such relative ductility may shape interpersonal and intergroup relations and, in turn, the trajectory of war to peace transitions.

Acknowledging and building on this previous research, this article discusses existing understandings of the micro- and the assumptions undergirding them. Rather than aiming to establish a definitive characterization, we set out the parameters framing the deployment of micro-dynamics as an intentional and directed application for analysis within peace and conflict studies. The research presented here argues that the conceptual lens of micro-dynamics delivers three specific sets of insights which elucidate a more nuanced and precise understanding of the complex intersectionality and multifaceted agency of lives in divided societies, where ongoing violence and intergroup cleavages habitually shape everyday coexistence. Each theme, explained briefly below, will be developed in greater detail in the main body of the article.

First, a micro-dynamics lens facilitates a granular, meaningful approach to the study of boundaries and geographic divisions. Specifically, this perspective allows us to comprehend the spatialized lexicon which moulds and is moulded by how civilians navigate violent geographies in post-accord societies.

Second, by being attuned to the small details and gestures of everyday life and, specifically, to how civilians make and interpret meaning, a micro-dynamics lens provides insight into how local, national and inter/transnational dynamics sit alongside and shape one another. Our approach demonstrates explicitly how the micro-dynamics that play out at the interpersonal level are embedded within and co-constitutive of wider intra- and intergroup relations and the relations of power that undergird them. Acknowledging the utility of the micro-dynamics lens to illustrate the interconnections between the micro- and other scalar levels of analysis, the article sets out how a micro-dynamics lens explicates understanding of what we characterize as the peace and conflict ecosystem.

Third, by facilitating our appreciation of what is ultimately an intimate world of encounter, contestation, cooperation and navigation, a micro-dynamics lens represents a useful tool for understanding interpersonal, intra- and intergroup relations in the wake of a peace agreement. A micro-lens, in this regard, can strengthen our analysis, elucidating how interpersonal interactions and the beliefs and perceptions upon which they are based texture everyday life and how, under certain conditions, they may precipitate wider consequences, including across distinct levels.

Given the above, this article contends that the micro-, and specifically, micro-dynamics, represents an analytically useful tool within the study of peace and conflict, providing multilayered

insights of complex scenarios based upon thick, empirically led inductive analysis. Given the potential of micro-dynamics to represent such an innovative analytical framework within the sub-discipline, it seems prudent to identify further its operational boundaries and possibilities, including ascertaining the strictures of those actions that fall within the category of micro-dynamics and characterizing the parameters within which micro-dynamics occur.

In its first section, the article sets out our definition of micro-dynamics, before addressing some of the core challenges to understanding ‘micro-’ and ‘micro-dynamics’, through an engagement with the term from across wider literatures. We discuss the multiple meanings attached to the micro- across diverse scholarship and draw attention to some of the questions this raises. Our definition of micro-dynamics is not presented as canon, but rather aims to advance ongoing conversations within the subfield of peace and conflict studies. The article subsequently illustrates the value and deepens the conceptual understanding of the ‘micro-dynamics’ lens, by addressing the three key themes introduced above.

The aim of the article is to contribute to the conceptual scoping of micro-dynamics, building upon research carried out between 2021 and 2024 in Colombia, Lebanon and Northern Ireland into the micro-dynamics of post-accord intergroup relations. The article does not develop the empirical data captured within the confines of the project. However, we incorporate reference to and excerpts from some of the 358 interviews carried out in-country to illustrate our key assertions.<sup>1</sup>

Influenced by recent contributions on peace and conflict operating as, and constituting, complex systems (De Coning, 2018; Millar, 2020), the article ultimately contends that ‘micro-dynamics’ represents a level of analysis and innovative framework through which to comprehend conflict-affected societies as complex, evolving ecosystems constituted by developing territories, relationships, interactions and structures, rather than as static, totalized/totalizing warsapes (Lubkemann, 2008).

## Micro-dynamics : A definition

The definition presented in this article is not proposed as canonical or conclusive. Rather, the objective of setting out our definition is to contribute to a wider epistemic development (across diverse disciplines) and to advance conversations addressing social theory that unpack and develop further what we perceive to be a commonly used, yet underscrutinized concept: the micro- and, specifically, micro-dynamics. Given the wide-ranging deployment of the micro- across diverse literatures, refining what appears to be an already well-laid path may seem a redundant endeavour. However, it is our belief that the lack of consensus over the definition of the micro- and, specifically, of micro-dynamics provides a unique opportunity to deliberate critically over the meaning of the term. This discussion, we suggest, can contribute to engendering further interdisciplinary dialogue on the micro-, while positioning micro-dynamics intentionally within peace and conflict studies.

We posit that micro-dynamics may be defined as *the actions, reactions and interactions that comprise interpersonal social relations emanating from the individual, which, in turn, constitute a core foundation of the societal ecosystem*. The definition we offer is, in itself, hardly a sophisticated or controversial one. Rather, as the article will evidence, it is the utility of the concept with respect to its potential as an analytical lens and sense-making tool and the implications arising from its deployment that we find compelling. We situate individual, interpersonal interactions at the core of micro-dynamics, which become co-constitutive of other scales of action (such as the macro- and meso-) and other levels (such as the local, subnational, national and international). In this respect, we regard the individual as the base unit of micro-dynamics and place an emphasis on the social relations between individuals and between individuals and their context.

## **What are micro-dynamics?**

For our purposes, the concept of micro-dynamics encapsulates three elements. Firstly, it points us to a level of analysis: the micro-, raising questions regarding where the micro- sits in relation to other levels of analysis and analytical power it may have in its own right. Secondly, micro-dynamics indicates a unit of analysis: the individual. As discussed in a subsequent subsection, using the individual as a primary unit of analysis is transgressive to some assumptions in international relations, although in keeping with turns within sociology and anthropology. The third element relates to the phenomenon or actions that the concept of micro-dynamics seeks to capture, namely activities and interactions at the micro-level. Again the literature in this respect is relatively disparate, hence the need for a detailed unpacking of the meanings and uses of the micro-dynamics concept.

Our definition builds on the extant literature, while also responding to inconsistencies that have emerged around the term to highlight how precision adds value. As early as 1985, Azar (1985: 29) insightfully argued that ‘real sources of conflict – as distinct from features – are deep-rooted in the lives and ontological beings of those concerned’. Boulding (1999: 451), in her research, also referred to the deep-rootedness of sources conflict within the individual, stating how ‘Raising children and shaping attitudes and behaviours determines how peacefully or violently individuals handle behaviour’. Authors have since identified the micro-dynamics of conflict, civil war and peace as ‘a new analytical framework’ (Raeymaekers et al., 2013) or ‘a new research program’ (Kalyvas, 2008: 397), yet it is common for much of this literature to avoid explicit definitional discussion of micro-dynamics, focus on or combine different units, or use the term interchangeably with other concepts such as the local and the everyday. Micro-dynamics has a complex genealogy, complicated by the fact that the term is sometimes invoked but not defined or clarified (Bencherif et al., 2020; Lake, 2017). We examined a broad range of research from the last 30 years that expressed a stated purpose to analyse/apply micro-dynamics around issues of peace and conflict. In the remaining sections, we further explicate our definition and specifically set out micro-dynamics as a level of analysis, a unit of analysis and ultimately a sense-making tool that is able to capture ‘dynamics’ or agency.

Much of the literature on the micro- emerged in response to the historically disproportionate focus on the macro-level: aggregate, international and national/state-level studies of war and conflict (Balcells and Stanton, 2021; Kalyvas, 2008: 397). Researchers in this growing field of study take pains to clarify that the micro- in peace and conflict studies is explicitly not the ‘national’ or the ‘state’ (Balcells and Justino, 2014; Sosa, 2023), the ‘international’ (Beber and Blattman, 2013; Haer et al., 2019), or ‘capital-based dynamics’ (Autesserre, 2014a). The micro- does not then refer to the ‘resources, vested interests, liberal values and the politics of United Nations mandates’ (Autesserre, 2014a: 495), wider political, economic, or social processes (Balcells and Justino, 2014; Haer et al., 2019), or ‘aggregated and static factors such as state capacity and the existence of natural resources’ (Ito and Hinkkainen Elliott, 2020: 872). This questioning of the macro- perspective leads Balcells and Stanton (2021: 46) to define the primary unit at the micro-level as the ‘subnational’, a term encompassing regions, provinces and localities, as well as groups and individuals.

Yet the concept of micro-dynamics has evolved as the study of peace and conflict has developed. Kalyvas (2003, 2012a) has been fundamental in ushering in the micro-turn in civil war studies, and offering insights that link micro- and macro-levels. Laitin’s (1998) research sought coherently to bridge micro- and macro-analysis of identity formation, exploring how individuals develop meaningful strategies to cope with macro-level pressure. Many researchers associate micro-dynamics with ‘human decision-making in high-stress situations’ (Stanley, 2018: 178). This may be manifest, for example, in insurgents’ ‘strategic calculation’ in relation to

government forces (Arjona, 2016; Ito and Hinkkainen Elliott, 2020: 873), or ‘the detailed study of specific acts of violence and how they were committed’ (Verweijen, 2020: 1). Serpa and Ferreira (2019: 122) characterize micro-dynamics as the product of ‘individual agents and interactive processes’, while Rigual et al. (2022: 349) study the micro-dynamics of gender in conflict through a ‘focus on people’s agency and social practices’. Majumdar and Chatterjee (2021) address how micro-transformations affect the wider peace and conflict environment. Phayal et al. (2015) explore how the micro-dynamics of DDR processes might shape former combatants’ well-being. Peitz and Reisch (2019) analyse the behaviour of peacekeepers in conflict areas, much like Autesserre’s (2014a: 495) interest in ‘what international interveners actually do in the field’.

In the studies reviewed, the term micro-dynamics is deployed broadly to include the behaviour of rebel groups, households, peacekeeping units and individuals. Definitions of micro-dynamics often cluster together several distinct units of analysis. For instance, for Justino et al. (2013: 3), the micro- comprises ‘individuals, households, groups and communities’. Micro-dynamics are also associated with organizational and structural factors, such as conditions of poverty, lack of infrastructure, and interpersonal relations, or include different forms of ‘grassroots institutions, community dynamics or degrees of rebel control’ (Autesserre, 2014a: 496), or even decisions by institutional bodies, such as courts (Lake, 2017).

Individuals, households, communities, organizations and battalions, for instance, represent units of analysis smaller than the state, and, as such, hold the potential for more granular data. Yet such groupings can also be broad and heterogenous (Justino et al., 2013: 6). At the same time, terms like ‘community’ are subject to debate about scope (Guijt and Shah, 1998). Studying an armed group as a unit may be helpful to examine certain types of behaviour. However, representing an armed group as existing uniquely within the micro- may at the same time exclude nuanced understanding of the kinship, familial and tribal relations between combatants within the armed group (Bencherif et al., 2020; Vigh, 2022). The inclusion of group, organization and community within *micro-dynamics* risks stretching the term then.

However, the broad literature on micro-dynamics coalesces around the idea that conflict is driven by individuals’ behaviour and their repeated interactions with their surroundings – effectively, its micro-foundations (Verwimp et al., 2009). Balcells and Justino (2014: 1345) specify that the micro-level ‘encompasses conflict processes that involve individuals or households (e.g. participation in violence or recruitment, social and economic coping strategies, and decision to support factions)’, demonstrating a distinct focus on human action and behaviour. Indeed, Haer et al. (2019: 152) introduce their special issue on the micro-dynamics of war by stating that at ‘a fundamental level, conflict originates from individuals’ behaviour and their repeated interactions with their surroundings’. Despite some variation and grouping of different units, therefore, there is a common insistence on the individual – and their actions – as a key unit of analysis within the micro- approach, an approach with which we agree.

## Levels of analysis

The study of peace and conflict has paid less attention to the question of levels compared to other disciplines, such as economics (Balcells and Justino, 2014: 1348). For example, microeconomics examines behaviour and interactions of individual agents, while macroeconomics studies aggregate patterns of market behaviour (Weintraub, 1979).

However, some work in relevant disciplines has set out to clarify levels. Smeulders and Hoex (2010), for instance, categorize the general context of an armed conflict as the macro-perspective, intergroup dynamics as the meso-perspective and individual perpetrators as the micro-perspective. The micro-,

therefore, stands in contrast to the macro-level processes of conflict that occur ‘at the level of the state (e.g. the establishment of elections, restructuring of property rights, justice and security reforms, demobilization and reconstruction programs, peace agreements, conflict negotiations, and outcomes)’, or the meso, which are ‘processes that take place at the community level or at the level of local social groups and organizations (e.g. local forms of collective action and governance, local institutions, and local and group leadership)’ (Balcells and Justino, 2014: 1345). In a special issue on linkages between micro- and macro-levels in war, various authors signal the importance of meso-level connections, such as wartime institutions established by armed groups and civilians (Arjona, 2014) or group capacity and technology (Balcells and Kalyvas, 2014), to conflict outcomes.

The introduction of the meso-level, borrowed from sociology, has contributed to the evolution of levels of analysis in peace and conflict and war studies. In their review of the micro–macro divide, Balcells and Stanton (2021: 46) observe that the meso-level has begun to take on increasing significance. Some scholars reserve the designation of micro- to the individual level and meso- to group dynamics, rather than collapsing subnational institutions, the structure of armed groups, and behaviour and attitudes of individuals within the micro-. Bencherif et al. (2020) argue that unlike much of the early research on the micro-dynamics of conflict, the meso-level may be more apt for the consideration of the dynamics between armed groups than the micro-level. Turner (2012) argues that there are two social universes: the macro-universe of institutions, stratification and societies on one side, and the micro-universe of encounters between individuals on the other. Mediating between these overarching structures and institutions and the individual is the meso-level, as an intervening point of analysis, concerned with groups, norms and categorical units (Turner, 2012: vii).

Within sociology, the turn to micro-dynamics also evolved, in part, to challenge existing macro-conceptualizations of the world. Knorr argues that the ‘normative conception of order is at the same time a macro-level conception of order’, where ‘society is integrated by shared values and obligations’, which, in turn, ‘determine individual conduct’. Instead, a micro-sociological approach sought to draw on a cognitive model that ‘gives primary consideration to the agents’ practical reasoning . . . a move which posits a knowing, active subject at the source of human conduct’ (Knorr, 1981: 3–4).

Taking this approach, Collins’ (2004) micro-sociological theory of violence is particularly influential. He posits that the micro- of conflict is comprised of ‘interaction rituals’ consisting of situations where people are co-present, have a mutual focus attention, feel a barrier to outsiders, and share a mood (Collins, 2004). Bramsen’s (2023) research on *the Microsociology of Peace and Conflict* builds directly on Collins’ research to explore how energizing and de-energizing interaction rituals shape violent and nonviolent conflict. Indeed, this distinction between levels recognizes that the only actions that are taken are by individuals; as Collins (2004: 259) argues, ‘micro-situational encounters are the ground-zero of all social action and all sociological evidence. Nothing has reality unless it is manifested in a situation somewhere.’ States and markets do not act, at least not in the same way as individuals do, then, but rather represent a set of structures, institutions and norms that are constituted through the actions and attitudes of individuals with differing degrees of power and resources.

## The micro, the local and the everyday

A further challenge is that, in much of the existing literature in studies of peace and conflict, the micro-level is used interchangeably with ‘the local’, the ‘local turn’ and ‘the everyday’ (Gibbons and Otieku-Boadu, 2021; Roepstorff, 2020). We argue, however, that the micro-dynamics lens, in fact, advances the local and everyday approaches. Micro-dynamics brings specificity in terms of the level and unit of analysis (individual), but also crafts a focus on agency or dynamics.



As Ljungkvist and Jarstad (2021: 2209) note, since the ‘local turn’ in peace and conflict studies, there has been ‘substantive frustration with regards to the conceptual fuzziness of “the local” . . . Who, what and where is the local?’ Moreover, despite research on hybridity (Mac Ginty, 2014), the construction of the local and the international as binary opposites without understanding where the boundaries of the local ends and the global begins adds to this fuzziness (Paffenholz, 2018).

These binaries reflect some of the tensions found in the micro- versus macro-levels of analysis, while their conflation also invites normative association of where ‘the people’ are located and implies, in turn, that the national and international are somehow devoid of individual actors and their networks. This perspective reflects the interest in the application of micro-dynamics as a tool to focus on actors and the activities often excluded from traditional peace and conflict studies (Autesserre, 2010, 2014a, 2014b; Rigual et al., 2022). Haer et al. (2019: 153) suggest that studies of the micro- ‘not only emphasize the importance of the actors at the local level, but also the relevance of investigating everyday activities rather than focusing on extraordinary activities such as riots or murders’ and ‘on actors who feature less prominently in state-centric macro-level research’. Rigual et al. (2022: 346) observe that literature in peace and conflict studies has contributed to the study of the micro- – as a unit of analysis of the individual – ‘a spatial orientation toward the subnational’ and an ‘ontological orientation towards the everyday’.

This approach to micro-dynamics adds significant value and insight and we strongly agree with the general principle of focusing the micro-dynamics approach upon people often overlooked in analyses of peace and conflict. The study of micro-dynamics offers an opportunity to focus on individuals whose agency may not be self-evident in declarations of wars, production of peace agreements, passing of laws, or allocation of state resources. This angle pushes researchers to consider civilians not as merely passive victims or observers of conflict, but rather as possessing agency. Such an approach, moreover, challenges previous stereotyping of micro-level dimensions of conflict as referring essentially to powerless and involuntary masses of passive actors (Justino et al., 2013: 7; Lubkemann, 2008).

However, conflating the concepts of the everyday and the local with the micro-level and micro-dynamics risks prioritizing a specific type of person and their group identity, who is bounded in a specific spatial area defined by the researcher and engages in a specific type of action or event determined by the researcher to be ‘ordinary’. These are loaded concepts and risk putting the researchers’ biases first rather than understanding the spatial, temporal and agency-focused boundedness of the micro-. This is not to discount the value of ‘local turn’, but rather to consider critically the impact of approaching micro-dynamics through a spatial turn, which implies a restricted boundary of space that these actors inhabit. Indeed, Mac Ginty (2015: 814) suggests that we move away from understanding the local primarily in terms of geography/place, and instead as *de-territorialized*, networked and constituted by people and activity.

This section has discussed a series of common themes across the literature on micro-dynamics, highlighting the employment of the micro- as a level of analysis to challenge and differentiate subjects of study from more generalized phenomena. We identified tendencies that fracture a coherent, consensual understanding of micro-dynamics, in turn restricting a consistent understanding of the term and its comparative operationalization and deployment across disciplines and cases. We believe that a key measure of a definition is its utility. In the following three sections, we demonstrate how the application of conceptual lens of micro-dynamics can deliver nuanced insights into the complex factors shaping lives lived in divided societies.

## Micro-dynamics and the study of boundaries

Our micro-dynamics definition/lens can be operationalized in relation to the study of boundaries in conflict-affected societies. A micro-dynamic approach, and the ethnographic research methods it entails, illustrates effectively how boundary making and maintenance are core parts of the everyday repertoire of social agency in conflict-affected societies. Boundaries serve to delineate communities and edify areas governed by norms and rules of behaviour (Justin and De Vries, 2019; Lessmann and Steinkraus, 2019; Mayrl and Quinn, 2016; Migdal, 2004). Literature on urban conflict studies has taken a narrow geographical approach, focusing on the sub-units of city neighbourhoods in order to understand interethnic violence (Ackerman et al., 2007; LeBeau and Leitner, 2011; Rokem and Boano, 2017). For Bollens (2012: 16), armed actors in cities operate in close proximity with and in connectivity to each other, seeking to control spaces and places as well as the populations that become ‘part of the daily practice of territoriality in the cityscape’.

A micro-dynamics approach brings to the foreground the territorial nature of violent conflict and its concomitant intimate geographies. Interviews based on research carried out in localities in Colombia, Lebanon and Northern Ireland repeatedly illustrate the hyper-localism of conflict geographies, where close neighbours are identified as members of the adversary/out-group, which often persists into the post-accord scenario. Project interview data repeatedly references in-group and out-group identifiers within hyper-local spatialities depicting lifeworlds connected to a particular bounded community (Catholic, Shia etc.). Many of these boundaries are complex, encompassing subsets of the main group or signalling peculiarities connected with time or space. A Catholic male in Northern Ireland stated how he would still not stop in specific areas he associated with sectarian divisions from ‘the Troubles’ (Interview 1).

Boundaries in conflict-affected societies are, moreover, often informal and invisible, emerging during interpersonal contact. They may shift or be hardened or softened through ‘boundary activation’ (Tilly, 2010: 130). The micro-dynamics lens also evidences the cognitive nature of boundaries (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2016; Hart, 2002), which habitually connect with specific attributes perceived as marking identity. According to one Protestant interviewee,

my boss come in and hung up a shamrock on the notice board for St. Patrick’s Day . . . You’re not allowed to do that, but it’s okay for her to come in and put a shamrock up on because she is a Catholic . . . if we were to do that, put a Union Jack or something up, it wouldn’t be seen as right. Well, I haven’t put my flag out, but I am putting my flag out this year. (Interview 2)

Boundaries play a key role in shaping interactions between individuals at the micro-level and their connections to more formalized macro-cleavages. Much of this feeds into psychogeography or the sense that territorial boundedness is, in part, a construction related to identity and the association of particular areas with a group or an incident. Research by Gregory (1994) has relatedly identified the spatial imaginaries of ‘otherness’ that label landscapes as belonging to the in- or out-group, whilst feminist geography has observed how territory is overlaid with gendered landscapes of fear that may occasion spatial exclusion (Dowler, 2005; Katz, 2013; Sharp, 2005).

The micro-dynamic lens illustrates, moreover, the malleability of boundaries – both physical and cognitive. Demographic shifts, for example, show how territoriality can change (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2016; Fischer, 2016; Komarova and O’Dowd, 2016). Interviews from Belfast regularly mentioned population shifts and how territory and identity became melded.

The micro-dynamic lens similarly reveals a ‘variable geometry’ of boundaries. Interviews demonstrated how an individual might maintain a hard boundary on one issue (for example, intergroup marriage, or visiting certain parts of a city), but be less firm on other issues (for example, specific intergroup friendships). This complexity is illustrated by an interviewee in a mainly Christian



village in southern Lebanon who noted that there were ‘good relationships’ with neighbouring mainly Muslim villages but, when prompted, only identified transactional or trading-type relationships (Interview 3). Similarly, from a temporal dimension, the Catholic interviewee in Northern Ireland (Interview 1) noted that in the run-up to the 12 July parades, Protestant neighbours who ordinarily spoke to Catholics ‘stop speaking to Catholic people’. Boundaries are also marbled with intersectional stratifications. Project data shows clearly how issues of class, gender and power shape boundaries and mould the impact boundaries may have on interpersonal and, often, inter-group relationships. Data demonstrated how relations of power – and the concomitant interplay between structure and agency – influenced the degree to which boundaries may be constructed, maintained and contested by individuals through interpersonal dynamics. An interviewee from southern Lebanon, for example, reflected on the time of the Israeli occupation when travel permits were required and the system (structure) was stacked against individuals. As he observed, ‘they didn’t give a reason why’ when permits were refused (Interview 4). In other cases, however, individuals did have some agency to compartmentalize or screen out.

This section has demonstrated how a micro-dynamics lens can facilitate a nuanced, data-led understanding of the complex factors shaping how boundaries are constructed and contested in conflict-affected societies. Verwimp et al. (2009: 307) posit that conflict, violence and division of space originate in individuals’ behaviour and their repeated interactions with their surroundings. From this perspective, a micro-dynamics approach illustrates how civil wars/internal armed conflicts are rarely uniformly representative at the national level. In short, supposedly uniform, national-level conflicts ultimately hasten multiple subnational conflicts, which manifest their core expression at the micro-level (Arjona, 2014). A micro-dynamics lens ultimately elucidates how, in said spaces, the interactions between individuals and their environments co-constitute geographies of peace, conflict and the states in between.

## Micro-dynamics in peace and conflict ecosystems

A growing literature on the ‘politics of scale’ has persuasively contested static dichotomies of micro–macro/local–international (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2016), identifying the ‘duality of spatial fixity and fluidity’ and the ‘shifting and contested’ nature of scalar configurations that are never uniquely local or global (Marston et al., 2005: 418). Whilst peace and conflict scholars have only recently engaged with questions of space, place and scale, geographers, in fact, have long been concerned with such matters (Koopman, 2017).

A micro-dynamics approach represents a key tool for incorporating such complexity in the analysis of peace and conflict ecosystems. Specifically, adopting a micro-dynamics lens in order to understand a conflict ecosystem allows us to grasp the complexity of peace and conflict and the bidirectionality of levels of analysis (Martín-Baró, 1994; Pettigrew, 2006).

There is no consensus in ecological studies on a standard size or boundary of an ecosystem – it may range from a tidal pool to a desert. Rather, an ecosystem is usually defined according to a threshold of consistent interactions between biotic and abiotic, endogenous and exogenous factors that maintains a degree of homogeneity (Lindeman, 1942).

An ecosystemic approach to peace and conflict is not entirely new. Kilcullen (2011), for example, describes a conflict ecosystem as the arena of competitive control between insurgents and counterinsurgents, where civilians choose loyalties based on security provision. From a different perspective, Cheng (2018) argues that a conflict ecosystem is characterized by entangled norms, values, social relations, as well as local and national relationships. Waterman and Worrall (2020: 568) argue that the growing study of ‘micro-level conflict processes’ has opened exploration into the ‘heterogeneous relationships between actors within the conflict ecosystem’. While the approach

is still in nascent stages, Waterman and Worrall (2020: 576) posit that research in conflict requires a more ‘comprehensive mapping exercise wherein order is understood less as a dyad and more as a dynamic ecosystem of layered interactions’. As Kirby and Shepherd (2021: 8) argue, ‘the parameters of the ecosystem are not set in advance by inherent features, but arise out of the relational interaction of the actors within it’.

Micro-dynamics, as we define them, facilitate understanding of the peace and conflict ecosystem. A naturalistic analogy for a social model can only go so far, of course. The study of power and politics in human systems should not be confused ‘as an organic, inevitable outgrowth of human needs for regulation’ (Weaver-Hightower, 2008: 157). However, studying individual-level actions and interactions in relation to wider groups and structures resonates closely with definitions of ecosystems as dynamic entities shaped by the interplay between interconnected internal and external factors that occasion communities (and from our perspective, individuals) as inseparable from their wider environment (Lindeman, 1942), despite their specific contextual idiosyncrasies. For example, interactions between peacekeepers and conflict-affected communities are shaped by peacekeepers’ own biases, group identities and personal preferences, leading to a complex set of interactions that can shape the outcome of the operation (Autesserre, 2014a).

As a way of illustrating how a micro-dynamics lens can facilitate an understanding of the multiscalarity operating within a conflict ecosystem, consider the example of a small rural town in Colombia from our field study. Since the signing of the 2016 Santos-FARC-EP peace accords, former guerrilla combatants have gradually reintegrated into the town, although it remains at the centre of violence linked to the ongoing armed conflict and wider drug production/trafficking. Whilst widespread local participation in the country’s 2021 national mobilizations brought residents together, relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups remain complex, often strained. They have been moulded by long historical patterns of land ownership and perceived ethnic affiliations with armed groups. In the town, a pool bar, where male residents meet to watch and bet on football, has become a significant component of local life. Gambling and the exchange of money are considerable, since many who frequent the bar have high disposable incomes from coca production. Football, gambling and pool transcend political, ethnic or racial membership and may even involve members of armed groups, with whom the owner of the bar occasionally negotiates to prevent weapons from being brought inside (Interview 5).

Legal pastimes here are permeated by both transnational illicit production/trafficking dynamics and the complex politico-military dynamics between armed groups in the wider subnational region. Outlying areas, for example, are subject to armed incursions by the military and illegal armed groups, which sometimes directly reach the town. Friction between armed groups and civilians is physically grafted onto the landscape. On one house, for example, graffiti supporting one armed group had been painted over by the owner, and was subsequently repainted by the armed group, evidencing a cyclical, symbolic war of attrition. Residents meticulously plan when to leave work to get home before sundown and, once they arrive, do not leave again until morning to avoid armed groups and the threat of violence (Interview 6). The rule of thumb is of avoidance: stay inside and never answer an unknown number to minimize insecurity.

This example demonstrates how the individual unit of analysis allows us to reach the experiential level of those living in a fragile, conflict-affected community, providing rich data on individuals’ tactics of avoidance, accommodation, or negotiation/navigation. Such tactics are not unique to any particular ethnic or racial group in this case, but rather cut across associational units of operation. They are, moreover, contingent upon wider structural factors operating at national and transnational levels, including illicit production/trafficking, government economic and security policy, and so forth.

A micro-dynamics lens helps us understand the integrated transmission-chain effect of a series of interconnected individual actions in a peace and conflict ecosystem, rather than isolating them from meso- and macro-factors. For example, in Derry/Londonderry, the annual 12 August Apprentice Boys parade was negotiated in the 1990s and early 2000s, through backchannels between representatives of the Nationalist and Unionist communities in the city to prevent further riots. These negotiations set the terms of city parades for the next two decades. According to interviewees, a more recent generation of community leaders on both sides has continued the initiative by organizing events to distract young potential rioters (on the Nationalist side) or keep parades in check (on the Unionist side) (Interviews 7 and 8).

Yet people's will to sustain good/peaceful relations is not always enough. Another member of the Unionist community whose family is involved in the parades noted how many are increasingly nervous about 'marching season in the last couple of years', as political tensions over the Brexit Protocol dominate the news cycle (Interview 9).

Understanding how individual agency contributes to complex systems can help us move towards a more nuanced understanding of transitions between peace and conflict – effectively, different ecosystem regimes. For example, the eventual phenomenon of relatively peaceful August parades is a product of individual decisionmaking, group identities and norms that remain sensitive to broader political realities. Westley et al. (2013: 2) argue, in this regard, that change cannot be associated with a single individual, but is a product of the strategies of diverse actors. As such, calibrating 'the micro-dynamics of social behaviour' represents a composite task in complex systems (Wiesner et al., 2018: 9).

Our micro-dynamics approach/definition highlights the complexity of peace and conflict ecosystems – a useful, if imperfect, analogy. As a lens, micro-dynamics provides a compelling tool to elucidate how people's creative/agential ability to confront the conditions shaping their grievances is linked to wider power relations between groups, institutions, states, and markets across national, international and transnational scales.

## **Micro-dynamics as a tool to understand interpersonal, intra- and intergroup relations**

Our micro-dynamics approach facilitates understanding and interrogates the nuances of interpersonal, intra- and intergroup relations in post-accord societies, illustrating how cooperation, accommodation and coexistence might sit alongside intergroup cleavages and what appear to be exclusive identities. While micro-dynamics as a term is relatively unused in social psychology (although see Doise, 1988; Pettigrew, 1996), its conceptualization is certainly present in theories of social identity and selfhood. Taking the unit of analysis of micro-dynamics as the individual, we understand the individual as the self within the social psychological arena, whereby the self regulates and determines behaviour to 'function effectively in their social world' (Harb and Smith, 2008: 178).

The self is differentiated along three dimensions – personal, social and collective (Brewer and Gardner, 1996) – all of which are relevant within a micro-dynamics framework. Thus, the individual is understood and defined by their individuated unit as well as by their cognitive representation as an individual member of a collective group (Harb and Smith, 2008; Turner et al., 1987). The cognitive representation of the self as a member of a group is in reference to the individual's surrounding context and the salience of relevant social categories (Harb and Smith, 2008). In other words, an individual defines themselves not only in relation to the self, but also in relation to their membership within a social group – their social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) being driven or determined by the social context within which the individual behaves and interacts.

Self-categorization as a member of a social group provides a sense of belonging (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and solidarity with other individuals perceived as in-group members (Reicher et al., 2010), while informing individuals of accepted norms for behaviour in intra- and intergroup scenarios. In post-accord societies, individuals are relentlessly aware of and utilize contextual cues informing them of others' identity background in situations necessitating interaction with others. In post-accord contexts, this can conjure/engender anxieties and antagonism or, at the very least, awkwardness and discomfort. Moreover, past experiences of conflict and contact as individuals and collectives matter and may either foster individuals' trust and approachability towards other adversaries or hinder it (Hewstone et al., 2014).

An individual whose social identities (e.g. ethnic, religious) might be rooted in and across historical societal conflict cleavages must contend with the reality of living and coexisting with others who are viewed as adversaries belonging to the out-group. Of course, individuals simultaneously hold multiple social categorizations (e.g. identity as a mother), which may cut across the potentially contentious identities, or may be represented under a superordinate identity to mitigate bias and avenues for violence (Crisp et al., 2001). Positive contact experiences – whether through organic or organized peacebuilding programmes – that highlight shared values and social norms can engender prosocial attitudes and foster constructive behaviours (Tropp et al., 2017). One woman in Beirut shared how encouraged she was when, after the port blast in August 2020, she witnessed a shared Lebanese community and corresponding collective acts of care as people volunteered to help clean up shattered glass and provide temporary assistance to local residents made homeless. In her words,

There is peace in Lebanon. You need to look at the events . . . when the blast happened, everyone supported each other. Everyone stood by each other. Ok, some things did happen, like they entered homes and stole and plundered. But this was also – there were political dimensions to it. (Interview 10)

Such optimism may be limited in scope and time frame. Episodes of cooperation between members of diverse racial/ethnic groups and, at times, armed groups – for example, organizing football tournaments, playing pool and gambling, as we noted in Colombia – occur concurrently with instances of contention, such as the antagonisms sculpted by historical exclusion and poverty and racial and ethnic relations, and, at times, the more malign and lethal episodes of political and criminal violence waged by armed actors.

A micro-dynamics framework allows us to examine how the interplay between the individual and intra- and intergroup relations textures life in post-accord contexts, where we find the complexities and challenges in multiple layers of these relations. For example, the Protestant woman from Belfast (Interview 2) narrated how she has developed good interpersonal working relationships with Catholic co-workers. She intentionally sends her children to an integrated school. However, she remains plagued by anxiety and memories of collective antagonism during the Troubles, when she had to drive through a renowned Catholic neighbourhood:

I just get it in my head if somebody was watching me and the driver hit me, I wouldn't know how to get out of here. So I didn't feel safe. And it's full of Republican paintings and things like that. It's quite intimidating. It's scary for me.

Such complexity is also manifest in the intragroup tensions created when individuals break with group norms, risking ostracism or expulsion. In a poor, marginalized neighbourhood of Cali, Colombia, for example, one participant (Interview 11) explained how programmes carried out by the M-19 guerrilla movement in his neighbourhood when he was younger helped shape his interest in education. These experiences catalysed his professional success and led him to occupy a

insider–outsider position in the community. Gradually, his more privileged colleagues perceived him as a gatekeeper for a neighbourhood known for rapidly growing drug trafficking and gang violence. Local gangs began, in turn, to view him with growing suspicion for bringing in outsiders. These dual pressures and shifting insecurities imposed by different groups and organizations – compounded by care duties for a relative – informed his eventual choice to move away from his neighbourhood to a ‘safer’ area.

Here, a micro-dynamics lens elucidates how interpersonal, intra- and intergroup interactions of cooperation and contention coexist in a delicate balance, ultimately constituting enabling and constraining factors across diverse and often interconnected levels within the peace and conflict ecosystem.

## Conclusion

In the wake of peace accords, societies are habitually post-accord and peaceless (Brett, 2022). Intergroup antagonism persists, while intergroup reconciliation remains brittle (Brett, 2022; Joshi and Wallenstein, 2018; Rosoux and Anstey, 2017). Here, political and criminal violence, poverty and exclusion often continue to shape lives lived under neither war nor peace (Mac Ginty, 2014). The objective of this article has been to contribute to wider conversations that explore how, under such conditions, individuals construct their lives in conflict-affected societies, employing agency (through cooperation or non-cooperation with armed groups, for example) and navigating wider structural factors as they do so (Arjona, 2015; Barter, 2017; Masullo, 2021; Schouten, 2022; Schubiger, 2021).

Specifically, we have contended that a micro-dynamics lens generates a granular understanding of (i) how individuals and groups experience and perceive physical, cognitive and symbolic boundaries; (ii) how individuals engage with, navigate, shape and adapt to inter- and intragroup relations sculpted by apparently exclusive national cleavages; and (iii) how individual/interpersonal relations at the micro-level interconnect with and are co-constitutive of other levels, which we term the peace and conflict ecosystem.

We have argued that, as a unit of analysis, a social phenomenon and sense-making tool, a micro-dynamics approach can offer significant insight into how individuals get on with their lives in conflict-affected societies. In our view, by delineating the level and unit of analysis and making clear the agential nature of micro-dynamics, the concept may shed light on the functioning of wider societal ecosystems and the role of individuals therein. As a methodological tool and an epistemological vantage point, moreover, micro-dynamics is well sited for observing the strategic/tactical agency and survival mechanisms employed in conflict-affected contexts. It sits, furthermore, in congruence with phenomenological and experiential lenses, and – crucially – can be complementary to lenses that may prioritize structures and processes. Thus the concept is useful in investigating multiscalar understandings of peace, conflict and everything in between.

Situating the individual as the base unit of analysis of micro-dynamics is hardly contentious. Other disciplines such as economics and social psychology have similarly centred the micro- on the individual, distinguishing this from the composite terms *meso-situational* and *macro-societal* (Pettigrew, 1996, 1998). There is now, moreover, a consolidated trajectory in peace and conflict studies that decentres the historical tendency in scholarship to locate states, organizations, peoples, space/place, time and conflicts as the primary units of analysis. Furthermore, neither does centring the individual exclude the influence of other associational units, such as the family, organization/group, community, political party, military, state and so on. On the contrary, as stated, the micro-level evidences how the individual frequently intersects and articulates closely with other associational units of operation.

It has, then, been our aim to characterize micro-dynamics as the actions carried out by and interactions between individuals, which, while taking place within a specific space, are frequently ‘not purely local events’ nor bounded therein, meaning they may yield wider consequences (Balcells and Justino, 2014: 1346). The geography of armed conflict, like any other ‘networked’ space, is the product of micro-level interrelations, constituted through interactions and constantly evolving. As Hart (2002, 35) explains,

places are always formed through relations with wider arenas and other places; boundaries are always socially constructed and contested; and the specificity of a place – however defined – arises from the particularity of interactions with what lies beyond it, that intersect or come into conjuncture in particular ways.


A micro-dynamics lens then evidences how complex peace and conflict ecosystems function beyond the constraints of a place-based lexicon and ‘geographical-spatial straitjacket’ (Waterman and Worrall, 2020: 578), uncovering the co-constituent, multiscale nature of individual/intra-group/intergroup interactions and relations across diverse spheres and levels. A micro-dynamics approach simultaneously, however, provides granular insight into how individuals assert agency and navigate structures within violent, intimate communities and geographic ‘arenas’ (Glawion, 2020). In so doing, micro-dynamics opens up the experiential level of analysis, disclosing the complex entanglements of ground-level existence/coexistence/contention within post-accord contexts. As such, a qualitative micro-dynamics approach can facilitate a nuanced, intersectional analysis of how power, gender, race, caste, ethnicity, class, sexuality and other factors shape individual interactions and (interdependent) wider social phenomena. As Rigual et al. (2022: 346) argue, the study of the micro- may hold ‘an epistemological orientation towards situated knowledge’ that prioritizes the particularities of specific experiences within their context.

A micro-dynamics lens as proposed in this article can capture information that may otherwise be difficult to access through other lenses or units of analysis, just as ethnographic and semi-ethnographic methods invoke richness within a particular context. Of fundamental interest for our future research is precisely how a micro-dynamics lens can elucidate how situated experiences affect how the peace and conflict ecosystem behaves.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Grant (UKRI), ES/V013432/1, Getting on with it: Understanding the micro-dynamics of Post-Accord Intergroup Social Relations.

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## Note

1. Interviews were collected with complete anonymity of participants and ethical approval was granted by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group at the University of Bristol on 8 February 2022.



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- Interview 1. Man, Age 40s, Catholic background, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 25.03.2022–13.05.2022 (multiple sessions)
- Interview 2. Woman, Age 40s, Protestant background, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 30.03.2022.
- Interview 3. Man, Age 50s, Christian Maronite background, South Lebanon, 28.01.2023.
- Interview 4. Man, Age 60s, Christian Maronite background, South Lebanon, 24.01.2023.
- Interview 5. Man, Age 50s, Bar owner, Nariño, Colombia, 11.07.2022.
- Interview 6. Men, Age 40s–50s, Local indigenous residents, Nariño, Colombia, 18.07.2022.
- Interview 7. Woman, Age 30s, Community organiser, Catholic background, London/Derry, Northern Ireland, 31.10.2022.
- Interview 8. Man, Age 40s, Community organiser, Protestant background, London/Derry, Northern Ireland, 12.11.2022.
- Interview 9. Woman, Age 40s, Protestant background, London/Derry, Northern Ireland, 27.10.2022.
- Interview 10. Woman, Age 30s, Shia background, Beirut, Lebanon, 26.09.2022.
- Interview 11. Man, Age 50s, Local resident, Cali, Colombia, 08.03.2022.

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