

**Choosing Peace:**  
*An Exploration of Motivations and Means of Peace Agency*

**Research Question:**

*Why and how do people choose peace in the midst of violence?*

- What beliefs, attitudes, or experiences motivate some individuals to act for peace, while many around them are engaging in violence?
- What strategies do such individuals employ in opting for peaceful approaches, and what sustains them in their efforts?
- How can others, particularly those outside the conflict context (ie, the international community), best support them?

**Problem Statement:**

In every conflict situation, no matter how violent and entrenched with human suffering, there are people building peace. This is a simple, yet seemingly radical, statement. In fact, despite the many tragedies of war and violence across the globe, the majority of the world, the majority of the time, in the majority of places is interacting in peaceful ways that mitigate and prevent violence, that keep communities, families, and nations safe and cooperating for shared goals.

The field of peace and conflict studies has made significant progress in understanding the causes and consequences of human violence and war. The development of theory around basic human needs, psycho-social processes, inter- and intragroup relations, structural violence, identity, and narrative all lend important insight into the motivations and means that drive people to engage in often horrific, “unthinkable” acts against other human beings. We are beginning to better recognize and understand the dark side of who we are, which can, in turn, help us devise strategies for better managing and resolving conflict without resort to violence.

At the same time, much less work has been done to rigorously research and understand the motivations and means employed by individuals who choose peace instead of violence. In large part, our theories and strategies begin from the recognition that violent conflict exists and so we seek to move toward peace. That the opposite is also true – peace exists alongside and even in the midst of violence – somehow is less apparent to us, or at least less thoroughly examined. The same linear thinking from negative to positive also tends to dominate the practices and policies of the peacebuilding community, including governmental and non-governmental actors. Despite a common recognition that peace is the ultimate goal, we have yet to develop a strong theoretical foundation or build a strong body of

## Problem Statement

evidence to explain how and why individuals and communities opt for peace over violence more often than not, and, notably, why they do so even in the midst of severe violence.

If, as Kenneth and Elise Boulding proposed, “what exists is possible,” then people choosing to actively pursue peace amid violence represents a critically understudied area of human possibility for transforming our world. It encompasses developing theories of individual and community agency for peaceful change – what I call *peace agency*; addressing questions of how choices at the micro level affect broader societal transformation, or *systems change*; and considering how the field as a whole can transform our own understanding, relationships, and resources in ways that strengthen the ability of local communities and individuals to choose peace in transformative ways.

My research will explore the question of why and how people choose peace in the midst of violence, with hopes of gaining insight into the motivations and means that drive individuals to make and sustain those choices. Motivations may include beliefs and values, attitudes, or personal experiences. They may include categories I have not considered. By examining means as well, I hope to understand not just why people are motivated to act for peace, but *how* they do so. That is, what are the strategies they employ and the resources – internal or external – upon which they draw the energy and ability to sustain their choices over time, often despite considerable risks to themselves.

In pursuing this research, I will draw from the pioneering work of theorists and practitioners who have studied the causes and consequences, the means and motivations, of peace. Peacebuilding theory and practice by individuals like John Paul Lederach, Adam Curle, Mary Anderson, Elise Boulding, and Oliver Richard will provide a critical base for my research. Studies of local capacities for peace by Chris Mitchell, Oliver Kaplan, and others will also serve as an important grounding for my work. Finally, social agency theory will be the third spoke of intersection for my research. By working in the nexus of these three lines of study – peacebuilding, local capacities for peace, and social agency – I hope my research can contribute to the development of theory around the concept of *peace agency*.

My methodology will include interviews of individuals who have chosen peace in the midst of violence (as will be defined within the study), focused on understanding motivations and means of those choices. It will take an iterative, grounded-theory approach, recognizing the research question is a theory-building one, without specific hypotheses that will be tested. At the same time, some preliminary hypotheses regarding motivations and means will be used in the development of the interview questions and process. For instance, consideration of the role of values and conscience that may motivate individuals toward peace; the effects of direct experiences with violence or peace; or the influence of leaders or personal mentors in shaping decisions. Individuals to be interviewed will be selected in order to

## Problem Statement

include diverse backgrounds in terms of geography, socio-economic position, societal roles, types of peace and conflict experiences, as well as gender, age, ethnicity and religion. Snow-balling will be used to expand a preliminary list of 15-20 individuals to interview, with the intention of completing at least 30 interviews. Qualitative content analysis of the interviews will then be used to draw conclusions regarding means and motivations that might inform a theory of peace agency.

As the challenges (and failures) of linear, externally driven approaches to addressing conflict are increasingly evident, and more attention is given to locally-led approaches, our field is ripe for fundamental re-examination of core questions. Improving our understanding of how and why people choose peace, even in the midst of violence, is critical for advancing the field of peace and conflict resolution toward a more holistic approach. My research seeks to better understand and recognize the realities of peace that already exist, often expressed through individual choices and actions, so that we may better support and expand them in the future.