

MANIFESTATIONS OF ACCEPTED CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF PEACE IN INTERNATIONAL DECISION-MAKING SPACES

“Peace, dignity, and equality on a healthy planet.” This phrase encapsulates the United Nations’ commitment to our world today as expressed in their motto. World peace is a concept we encounter ever so often in our everyday lives. It permeates discourse among politicians, celebrities, and other influential figures. Peace as an ideology is at the heart of almost every society across the globe. While this may seem ostensibly harmless, I believe there is much to gain from carefully dissecting our individual and collective interpretations of this multifaceted concept and its implications for society, at both small and large scales.

This essay seeks to uncover which ideas of peace are generally promoted in international decision-making spaces and what the implications are. I was recently granted the opportunity to embark on a trip to the United Nations Headquarters to attend the Economic and Social Council Youth Forum. My experience here will serve as a riveting case study for this analysis.

There are myriad definitions of peace across various academic fields. The Oxford Dictionary defines this concept as “freedom from disturbance.” While the nature of the disturbance is unspecified, it is often assumed to be physical. In the field of psychology specifically, extant research on peace as a construct demonstrates diversity in schools of thought regarding psychologists’ conceptualization of this construct. Notably, some renowned figures in the American branch of peace and conflict studies, such as Kenneth Boulding, have argued that peace can be understood through the lens of stability. Boulding delineated peace based on this metric into two categories: stable and unstable. The distinction lies in the looming threat of a

resumption of conflict amid unstable peace (Boulding, 1978). Another school of thought recognizes the need to categorize peace as static or dynamic and analyzes it either as an attainable goal or as an ongoing process (Boulding, 1977). Lastly, renowned psychologist Johan Galtung similarly classified peace along two dimensions: negative and positive. Negative peace can be understood as the absence of physical violence, and positive peace as the absence of structural violence. (Galtung, 1969). This paper will focus on the last two classifications of peace.

For various reasons, negative peace and static peace have gained greater popularity than their lesser-known alternatives. I believe that a comprehensive understanding of the amorphous concept of peace requires a thorough analysis of certain forms of its antithesis, violence. Negative peace addresses direct physical acts of violence that result in harm. On the other hand, positive violence directly addresses structural violence, which encompasses oppressive systems and structures (Weigert, 2010). Furthermore, other forms of violence exist as well, including cultural violence and epistemological violence. These manifestations of violence are interconnected and influence one another in various ways.

As mentioned previously, I attended the United Nations Economic and Social Council Youth Forum earlier in the semester, and this experience was highly instrumental in deepening my understanding of globally accepted definitions of peace and its manifestations in decision-making spaces such as the United Nations. I attended numerous panels and conferences during my stay, focused on empowering youth to advance economically and socially across nations. In each session, the conversation would usually circle back to peace as a fundamental tool in our journey toward economic and social stability. Participants in these discussion sessions

usually included, but were not limited to, representatives from countries relevant to the discussion's theme and other dignitaries holding positions of power within the United Nations.

One particular panel I attended was centered on empowering youth to be change-makers in times of conflict. Panelists included a number of ambassadors from various countries to the UN, a representative from the Department of Political Affairs and Peacebuilding, and several youth fellows. The panel began by reckoning with striking statistics of 'violence' from the UN Demographic and Social Statistics Office. We were reminded of the disheartening truth that one in four young people face the impact of violence and conflict, according to the last report on youth peace and security. Monologues were shared on the heart-wrenching reality of conflict and its effects across the globe.

Following this, the Department of Political Affairs and Peacebuilding identified trends that hindered the empowerment of youth in conflict zones. These included increased mistrust between young people and governments, reduced civic engagement spaces for youth, and laws that discriminated against youth by denying them the right to participate in decision-making based on their age, among others. This representative then quoted resolution 2250 of the 2015 YPS Agenda, which asserts that a nation cannot achieve peacebuilding efforts without involving the youth. This mandates nations to include the youth in decision-making spaces.

In discussing solutions to the outlined problems, they proposed increasing women's participation in peacekeeping, as affected groups may feel safer under the protection of women peacekeepers, and women are better at diplomatic relations than their male counterparts. They also discussed possibly instilling peacebuilding in the curriculum, defined as values such as loving your neighbor, treating people with respect and kindness, and so on. More of these strategies were discussed at length, and the panel ended with a heartfelt speech by a participant

from a war-stricken country about the importance of loving one another as brethren and working together in kindness and humility to achieve peace and harmony.

This discussion prompted me to analyze further which classifications of peace it was based on, leading me to realize that the panel's framework understood peace as negative and static. Peace was unanimously understood to be an attainable goal we are working toward. There was also a disproportionate amount of emphasis placed on building positive attitudes and eradicating physical violence, with very little discussion about issues of structural violence. Although addressing physical violence is of grave necessity, I believe that it should not come at the cost of addressing structural violence. The topic of the latter has become lost in peace discourse, even in these prestigious spaces.

Acclaimed psychologist Azarmandi, in his article analyzing peace studies in America, questions the validity of this perspective on peace. He asserts that such an understanding of peace reflects the white perspective on peace in the guise of an impartial, universal, and colorblind conceptualization (Azarmandi, 2018). I strongly believe this sheds more light on which group this perspective of peace favors, the dominant group. The status quo is most likely to favor members of a dominant group in society, and subverting structural violence may be a threat to the status quo, which the dominant group may then see as a symbolic threat; this is a threat to their accepted ways of living (Stephan, 2013). Hence, it is expected that their perceptions of peace would be more focused on removing physical violence rather than on approaches that might threaten what has been accepted as the norm. This white perception of peace may have informed universal ideas of peace, especially considering that many of the psychologists who contributed heavily to peace studies were white themselves, and their racial positionality may have affected their ideologies.

Ignoring structural inequity in our quest for peace is highly detrimental to marginalized groups across the globe, as it undermines their collective memory of oppression(Nicholson, 2017) and threatens the drive for collective action. Marginalized groups are forced to undermine their own realities of systemic oppression in order to maintain this false idea of 'peace,' which only favors the dominant group. This can be very harmful in the sense that marginalized groups are then subjected to permanency in their status in society and threatened with the idea of risking peace if they attempt to address structural issues.

I believe this ideology of peace was mirrored in the UNESCO Youth Forum panel. This poses the risk of forming policies toward peacebuilding within this incomplete ideological framework, focusing solely on eradicating physical violence without asking the bigger questions of what can be done to subvert structural violence as well, in order to ensure complete peace for marginalized groups.

Another panel that stood out to me during my visit was one focused on the continent of Africa and how to integrate youth into decision-making spaces to advance our individual countries and the continent as a whole. This panel was also attended largely by ministers of youth from various African countries and their delegations, certain distinguished members of the African Union, United Nations youth fellows, and other dignitaries.

We spoke at length about the future of Africa and how the older and younger generations could collaborate on straightening its trajectory. Some obstacles to collaborative progress identified were limited resources, resistance to change, and a lack of STEM-focused education, among others. The Youth in the room were then lectured on how to carve their paths into decision-making spaces, and some of the strategies were establishing critically demonstrated knowledge, creating a portfolio, expanding knowledge, and so on.

In this discussion, I noticed that our conversation lacked in several areas. Firstly, most of the challenges identified and the solutions given seemed superficial and failed to address larger systemic issues that I feel are of utmost importance in carving our paths toward progression as a continent. I raised a question pertaining to traces of colonialism in our governmental, economic, and educational structures, which I felt was a great source of structural violence in Africa. Unfortunately, my question was met with responses that demonstrated an underlying belief that colonization was a thing of the past and a disbelief in structural violence as a concept at all.

Feminist icon Betty Reardon poses the argument that “peace epistemologies need to include gender, racism, and colonialism, since they constitute the 'three major forms of global oppression.’” (Reardon, 2014). This statement deeply resonates with me as I believe these pillars of global oppression also form the bedrock of systemic violence, which is ignored in our embrace of an idea of negative peace. This conception of peace, which stems from the dominant group’s avoidance of symbolic threat, also leads to mass regression across the African continent. We have been deluded into thinking that peace can exist without reckoning with systems of oppression stemming from gender, racism, and colonialism, which then leads to systemic violence.

To conclude, I am firmly convinced that embracing the ideas of positive peace, which include subverting systemic structures of oppression and combating structural violence, is paramount in discourse on attaining peace, as it is a fertile breeding ground for sustainable development. It is also imperative to recognize our quest for peace as an ongoing process that requires continuous collective effort and dedication.

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