



Arist von Schlippe

# **The Carousel of Indignation and Outrage**

Understanding the Nature  
of Conflict Escalation and  
how to Limit it







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*Dedicated to my friend Jochen Schweitzer (†),  
with heartfelt affection*





## Foreword

When I was approached by Arist von Schlippe to write the foreword for this book, I could not have been more excited. Without revealing our age, Arist and I met a long time ago. I was just a fledging researcher and Arist was already a giant in the field. When I reached out to meet him for the first time, he could not have been nicer and more generous with his time. Based on this first meeting, we kept interacting and started working together on a few book chapters and journal-audience based research. At each step in our collaborations, I have always been impressed by the in-depth knowledge and wisdom that Arist exhibits, and I consider myself lucky to learn from him.

While most of Arist's work is published in German, we are fortunate that this book has been expertly translated and is now available for the English-speaking audience. As a conflict researcher, I believe that having this resource available will be useful to both conflict parties and counsellors alike.

When I think of carousels, I think of a circular motion: not really going anywhere, always ending up at the same point over and over again. The illustrator of the book had a similar notion; he shows a carousel with everyone yelling "Faster" or "I am the first" while turning in circles. I also associate the carousel with the notion of up and down movement. The carousel's animals go up and down, much as the ebb and flow of negative emotions that we experience.

However, on a positive note, I recall a particular scene from the movie, *Mary Poppins*, when Mary takes her wards and her friend Bert on a carousel ride. Indeed, Bert remarks that such a ride is very nice if one does not want to go anywhere. At this point, Mary, with the help of the carousel conductor, does her magic. The carousel figures break out of the circle and the entire group rides off to new, happy adventures.

The notion of a carousel serves Arist's conflict theme very well. Not only does he outline the ups and downs and the potential vicious cycle of conflict, but he also offers insights about how to break the circle and prevent conflict from escalating, even suggesting an exit. While the conflict parties may not



all ride together into the sunset after reading this book, the profound knowledge that Arist has accumulated through decades as a consultant and professor will provide value for conflict parties and mediators alike. This book will raise awareness of the underlying issues of the conflict experience and the potential to get off the carousel ride once it has started.

I hope you will enjoy reading this book from the pre-eminent authority on conflict and its management in Germany as much as I did.

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## Not a preface – but an “Instruction manual” for this book

The task of understanding conflicts and their dynamics and finding ways to address them has occupied me increasingly in recent decades. I have already written about this subject in various places, often with reference to entrepreneurial families: my specialist field as a family therapist in recent years. This book will summarise much of the content of these scattered publications under the metaphor of the carousel – a symbol for the circular organisation of processes within conflict systems. It would take too long to list the many colleagues from whom I have learned, with whom I have collaborated and with whom I have written texts but, in this regard, I must highlight my friend and colleague Haim Omer from Tel Aviv. His thoughts on helping families in highly escalated conflict situations to escape the dilemma between compliance or escalation by pursuing non-violent perseverance have had a profound impact on me.

Regarding the somewhat ambitious intention of this book: I would like to reach you, as a reader, first and foremost personally, whether you are yourself caught in an escalating conflict, whether you feel helpless observing those close to you in conflict, or whether you have to deal with conflictual relationships – at whatever level – in a professional capacity, as a supervisor or consultant. I would be pleased if you would reflect as often as possible while reading the book and ask yourself what the words written mean in your everyday life, your family relationships, and your practical environment. I would be happy if you become curious to notice where the text changes your perspective – be it on everyday events or conflict issues.

Occasionally, I will suggest transferring one thing or another into your own “conflict notebook”; the illustration in the margin here highlights these opportunities. At the same time, I am interested in making suggestions about dealing with conflict, whether it be about the manner in which we manoeuvre our own “conflict boat” through the rapids of escalation or how, as a practically active person, to support others in this endeavor. Finally, I would also like to contribute to the aca-



demic debate on the topic and show that the ideas of systems theory can be extremely helpful in understanding conflicts. This whole project aims to strike a balance – avoiding frightening off lay people and practitioners while not slipping under the radar in the academic field. I welcome your feedback. For their critical comments and suggestions during the writing of the book, I sincerely thank my wife, Rita, my esteemed colleagues Anita von Hertel, Franziska von Kummer, Lina Nagel, Barbara Ollefs and Susanne Quistorp, and my invaluable friend and colleague Jürgen Kriz. A big thank-you goes to my daughter Anna Greve, she gave me brilliant, critical and very precise remarks in working on the translation. Without her support, I might have despaired at the task.

But now, let us move on to the instruction manual: the book has three major parts, which can be read in sequence or independently of one another.

The first part is entitled “Don’t be afraid of theory”. Hmm, I wonder whether that will work. Well, I have tried to write as simply and understandably as possible and to clearly mark the occasional deeper dives, so that anyone who does not yet dare to venture into deeper waters can safely skip those parts (e.g. Chapter 4, especially 4.4), or read them just two pages at a time after dinner (we’re in the “instruction manual” here, after all). You could also skip the first part altogether or read only the chapter on indignation (even just from 3.2), which lays the foundations for understanding the engine of the carousel.

Or you could turn straight to the second major part and start riding the carousel. Here, I describe the many well-studied processes of social and conflict psychology, which strongly influence our thinking, perceiving, and remembering in conflictual communication contexts. I have always been interested in these mechanisms that we humans inherited from our ancestors from time immemorial. There is no need to follow the sequence of the chapters here – their content often overlaps and so you can jump to whichever heading attracts you – like riding a carousel, you can sit on one horse or another, they all go in the same direction. The second particular focus of the book is also connected with this part. My intention is to raise awareness of how much we are in danger of simply letting these inherited mechanisms take over when we are in conflict situations, without thinking or reflecting on what we are doing. They evolved long ago to help us react quickly in simple or only moderately complex environments where the alternatives were often life or death. That is why they disguise themselves so skilfully: we think we are acting rationally and are in possession of all our senses, but we are actually hypnotised by what is happening and, under the spell of this “conflict-hypnosis”, our actions lead to escalation. These mechanisms are so dangerous, on small and large scales. If we are not aware of them, they can lead us like sleepwalkers into small and also into large wars

(impressively described in Clark, 2013, regarding the First World War; let us hope that we have learnt something from that time but I am not entirely sure).

Why is conscious awareness of these processes so important to me? I have always been convinced by the words of the British-American anthropologist Gregory Bateson on the premises of human actions: “In a word, your perceptual machinery, the way you perceive, is governed by a system of presuppositions that I call your epistemology: a whole philosophy deep inside your mind but beyond your consciousness” (Bateson & Bateson, 2005, p. 136<sup>1</sup>, see also Chapter 18 in this book). One of Bateson’s main concerns was raising awareness of the implicit philosophy governing people’s actions, knowing that this can only ever be partially possible because “[...] we are not by any means the captains of our souls” (Bateson, 1972, p. 444).

If you so wish, you can also read the book back to front, beginning with the practical outlook in the third part. However, I deliberately did not set out to write a “conflict guidebook” or practical handbook, and I certainly did not want to reinvent the various intervention methods. There are many good books available with so-called toolboxes for this purpose and we also have a broad knowledge of practical methods of conflict resolution and mediation. Methodologically, I have little to add to these and would rather provide you with *thinking tools*. In this last part, therefore, I have outlined basic features of systemic conflict work that are easy to follow and can be useful in conflict resolution. In my first (German) book on conflict (von Schlippe, 2014c), I described three perspectives from which to constructively influence conflict events – as an affected party, an observer or a professional. Perhaps the third part of this book will offer some suggestions as well, without trying to pretend that any of these steps are easily feasible, instant, or complete solutions. I tend to be rather cautious about the chances of success when working with people in highly escalated conflicts. It is preferable not to expect Hollywood-style reconciliations (“Forgive me!”), but rather to appreciate the many small steps that sometimes improve the situation just a little. I simply mean by this that we should not set the bar too high. But it is certainly never in vain to work on one’s own consciousness when “under the influence” of a conflict.

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1 Some citations originally in English were translated back from the German by myself. I was unable to find all the original titles that I had used in German versions of books that had come out in English first. In these cases, the citation may differ from the original, and page numbers then refer to the German edition. I have listed the German source first in the reference list, and the English version second. If the English translation of an original German text is placed first in the reference list, then the citation is taken from the translation, and the page numbers refer to the English source.



## PART ONE: DON'T BE AFRAID OF THEORY

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In this part, I intend to make basic suggestions that can offer an understanding of conflicts and their dynamics, as mentioned, from the perspective of those personally affected as well as from a professional point of view. Precisely because many people respond to the word “theory” with a mixture of respect, fear and/or disinterest, I aim to approach the subject in such a way that the considerations presented can be translated directly and practically into private and professional day-to-day life. If a reader at least occasionally recognises themselves in the descriptions, my aim has been achieved.

My wish to promote an understanding of conflict lies at the heart of this book. It is not so much about providing a list of methods and tools for resolving conflicts (with alluring but sometimes also misleading promises of fast results). Rather, my focus is on understanding. Those who understand the dynamics of conflicts may also understand themselves better. The ability to understand oneself and others is possibly the best defence against the destructive escalation of conflict dynamics. Jay Forrester is credited with saying “The human mind is not suited to understanding human social systems” (quoted in Riedl, 1981, p. 89). But this should not mean, in my view, that we should not at least try.





# 1 The shape of conflict

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*“We do not live in the sort of universe in which simple lineal control is possible. Life is not like that ... We are by no means the captains of our souls”*  
(Bateson, 1972, p. 444).

---

## 1.1 What is conflict, actually?

Conflict is part of everyday human life. It is often seen negatively but can act as an engine of change in many different social situations. It forces us to adopt a clear position and stand up for our own beliefs and perspectives. In many conflict situations, negotiation and debate lead to long-term, sustainable results. Family life, in particular, is an important playing field for learning conflict resolution skills. In organisations, too, cognitive, factual conflicts about “tasks” (*what is to be done*) and “processes” (*how is it to be done*) are by no means considered problematic, because they bring the potential for positive outcomes and stimulate creativity and innovation (for a broad overview see Jehn, 2014; see also Jehn, 1997; Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2007; Rispens, 2014). It is difficult to imagine how a company could develop and grow without these conflicts.

However, conflict should not be trivialised. Once a conflict has arisen, the dynamics can easily take on a life of their own: disputes on a factual level can quickly shift from being focused on “tasks” and “processes” to becoming issues about “relationships”. It is this type of conflict that is responsible for the negative image of conflict. Emotions run ever higher, and the behavior of the actors becomes ever more irrational (at least from an outside perspective), even though those involved usually believe that they have everything under control. In reality, they have long since ceased to be “captains of their souls” and are unwittingly caught in a vicious circle (as the quote from Bateson that precedes this chapter suggests). Insults, slights and even physical attacks often cause lasting damage to the relationships between them, whether the differences are openly heated or covertly icy (Glasl, 2002; 2014a, 2014b). The damage to relationships is often significant: social systems can break apart, people leave their jobs, or get divorced, and much more.

It is this type of escalating conflict that is the primary concern of this book. Therefore, its focus will be on understanding and managing the destructive side of conflicts. It does not necessarily follow, as mentioned above, that conflicts should

be seen as inherently negative. On the contrary, the better we know and understand the dynamics which can take over an important factual dispute, the more constructively solutions can be found. “The difficulty in harnessing the positive, constructive potential of conflict stems from the fact that the negative, destructive potential is so great. As a result, the opportunity inherent in conflict is often not exploited in order to avoid the risk involved” (Simon, 2012, p. 36).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we must consciously address the issues in any conflict; a mere “Enough now, let’s all get on and shake hands!” is not sufficient. The task is to raise consciousness in the sense of developing a sensitivity to the development and maintenance of conflict dynamics (Harvey & Evans, 1994) or, to paraphrase the words of my colleague and friend Jochen Schweitzer: most conflicts are the result of an unintentional joint effort, and an intentional joint effort is required for their resolution or alleviation.<sup>3</sup>

Enough of the preface, let us now jump to the moment when it becomes clear that “We have a conflict!” What do we actually “have”? A conflict is not (as Figure 1 suggests) an object, one that can be measured. Although it is sometimes said of a conflict that it is large, heavy or light, no one has ever measured it in metres or kilograms (as far as I know). Interestingly, we also say “*we* have”.<sup>4</sup> Somehow, two or more people jointly have this “it”. Sometimes the other person answers that they see “it” differently: “No, we don’t have a conflict, it’s just a difference of opinion!” Aha, so there are obviously degrees of conflict.

However, when it comes to a “real conflict” (hmm, what is that again?), the last thing both parties agree on is that they disagree. Often there is no explicit starting point: we slip into it, one word leads to another and – out of nowhere – the conflict is there. “No, no,” one of the parties tells the consultant, “It’s not out of nowhere. If you knew what she had done!” – “Wait a minute,” says the other, “Please, don’t believe a word he says, that’s exactly the problem – he’s messing everything up! It was he who started it, and I’ll tell you the story. It was like this ...” – “Stop!” he<sup>5</sup> interrupts again, “That’s just it, she just doesn’t see her part in this! This will destroy our relationship if it goes on. I ask you – seriously, do we have to put up with this?”

2 Citations from original German sources were translated by myself.

3 He applies this more generally to psychosocial problems, but that is what conflicts are.

4 Of course, a person can also be in conflict with themselves but, even then, there are two opposing sides. This book is exclusively about social conflicts.

5 From time to time, I will use gender designations in an alternating manner; I do not like “gendering” throughout, even though I fully share the underlying concern not to exclude anyone linguistically. However, I regard asterisks, underscores and other signs as problematic, ideologically motivated interventions in language, which I do not want to adopt. The theme of different and diverse genders should certainly be recognisable throughout the book as food for thought, without the language having to contort itself too much.



Figure 1: A “real” conflict (drawing and copyright: Björn von Schlippe)

So, have we made some progress now on what conflict is? Yes, a little: it is not a “thing”, but a “some-thing” of some intensity (and more than just a difference of opinion) which takes place between two or more people. It takes the form of a chain of contradictions – or at least the tendency is to negate rather than concur: a pattern has emerged. In this sense, conflicts are everyday occurrences, usually resolved as quickly as they arise. Of interest to us are those that do not simply vanish. But only something that is there can disappear. In what way is a conflict “there”? You cannot see it; you may hear two people shouting at each other or sarcastically disparaging one another; you may see closed faces, frowns, bruises or worse, but you cannot see the conflict itself in the way that you see a thing. We experience it ourselves if we were involved; we can feel it in the atmosphere as an observer and name it accordingly (“You could cut the atmosphere with a knife here!”) or describe it as a dynamic pattern, perhaps even distinguishing between different stages of escalation (Glasl, 2002, 2014b; see also Chapter 15). In whichever case, it is clear that two (or more) people have constructed a strange (and at the same time familiar) form of communication from which they cannot easily exit.

The form of the conflict seems to be characterised by constant contradiction; a permanent “no” punctuates communication between the parties, whether

individuals or groups (Bonacker and Imbusch, 2004, p. 196). At the same time, conflict (here we are talking of “relationship conflict” in which facts play a decreasing role) also seems to be characterised by a primarily one-directional process: the level of contradiction in the communication tends to intensify, moving from factual differences to the devaluation of – and direct attacks on – the other. It becomes less and less about the matter at hand because the self-esteem of the person concerned is now being attacked: the ego is “under siege” (Pfaff, 2020, p. 2). Generalised statements starting with “always” or “never” are made and may even lead to physical aggression. The communication continues – as it does in any other communication system – but room for manoeuvre is lost. Few options remain, and the common denominator of those that do is to communicate a ‘no’ to the other, i.e. to reject offers of communication. Can we therefore say that ‘conflict is a dynamic of an intensifying mutual negation?’

Yes, there is something to that. As already mentioned, you cannot have a conflict alone. Let us say that one person wants to holiday by the sea, the other in the mountains (and they don’t know that in Asturias in the North of Spain they can have both together!). As long as both keep this desire to themselves, there is no conflict. Only when these wishes are communicated is there a chance that a conflict system will form. This requires a contradiction: “Mountains?” – “No, sea!” Still, that alone is not a conflict, something else is needed: the communicated contradiction must in turn be answered with another contradiction (Luhmann, 1995, 1996). Conflict needs a “double negation”: the ‘no’ is again negated (Simon, 2012). The word “dynamics” already indicates that this contradiction is not solely one sided: this is a *system* of contradicting each other. A conflict is a certain form of communication sequence: a communication is answered with a negation, and this is followed again by a negation. This kind of mirror-image reaction to each other is called “*symmetrical*”: formally, each side responds in the same way, or with more of the same, thus creating an escalation,<sup>6</sup> while conceding is called “*complementary*” (Bateson, 1972; Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967; more on this later in the chapter).

Only when a chain of such symmetrically related negations is recognisable do we “have” a conflict: “I would like to go on holiday to the sea this year!” – “Oh no, we’ve been there so often. I’d like to go to the mountains!” We already know that this alone is not enough – it is as if the match is lit, but that alone

6 In this sense, the small exercise in escalation, which can be carried out well in a seminar, is also symmetrical in form: the participants face each other in pairs and begin a “Yes!”-“No!” spiral, which usually increases quickly in volume. “No!” and “Yes!” are complementary words, but here they negate each other as contradiction from the form. A complementary answer to the yes or the no would be for example: “All right!” or “Agreed!”

does not start a fire; even if the paper is already burning, it is easily put out. The possibility of a complementary exit is still within reach: “Well, then, we’ll just do it the way you want!” or “How about a city trip this time?” But once the kindling catches fire, the thicker logs also have a chance. From here, it is still a long way to a forest fire, but it always starts like this, with the “match of the first contradiction”, the subsequent negation of the negation and thereafter its symmetrical negation: “But I want to go to the sea!” – “Oh, not again – you always want your own way!” (aha, let’s also remember this: a conflict often has a longer history. Old grudges are dragged into it: it’s not just about the holiday destination, but about the fact that, from the perspective of one person, it’s always the other who gets their own way and this frustrates them) – “You do too, you’re such a hypocrite!” – “I’ll tell you one thing: I’m definitely not going to the sea with you this year, you can be sure of that!” – “Okay, if you’re going to be like that, then I’ll go on my own!” – “There’s no need to be so aggressive!” – “I’m not being aggressive!” Positions are built up that are difficult to abandon (more to that in Chapter 19). We can imagine how the conversation continues.

Sooner or later, we get into dangerous waters: the positions harden. With every interaction, every communication that follows on from another in a conflictual – negating and defensive – manner, the conflict takes on a life of its own. The emerging conflict system takes over and, without noticing it, the parties relinquish their ability to control the situation and begin following the conflict system that they – and this is the exciting thing about these self-organising dynamics – have created themselves. As observers, we can see how, again and again, both parties try to control the dynamics, to de-escalate the conflict: “Come on, let’s talk reasonably with each other!” – but the pattern cannot be broken so easily, as we quickly recognise from the other’s response: “Sure, fine with me! Then stop talking all that nonsense! It’s not up to me, anyway!” and the conflict system is back on track.<sup>7</sup> Usually, we do not realise which internal psychological

7 This is masterfully captured in the play *The God of Carnage* by Yasmina Reza, also made into a film: all four characters (two couples) are benevolent and focused on a solution. They meet to talk about a quarrel between their respective sons, one of whom has knocked out the other’s front teeth with a stick. Now the letter to the insurance company has to be formulated. They try hard to keep the conflict under control (“We can talk about it like adults!” or “Would you like another sip of tea?”) but a conflict system quickly develops between them. It is presented as a force of its own, which, shortly before a possibly constructive end to a scene, repeatedly causes one of the four to make an escalating comment such as “But one *must* say that what your son did to ours was violence!” – And then it continues, the others react indignantly: “Well, we’ll have to discuss that now, it won’t do!” This, after already having said good-bye ... they sit down again and the conflict pattern continues. The conversation ends in disaster while, in the final scene, the two boys who had quarrelled are already playing peacefully with each other again.

processes lead us to choose the ‘one and only reality’ that we take as ‘truth’. Kriz emphasises “that we often lack awareness of the power of interpersonal dynamics and that our ‘conscious’ explanation of only reacting to the other person is neither correct nor helpful” (Kriz, 2017b, p. 192 f.). These mechanisms contribute significantly to the fact that the conflict patterns are so resistant to change. We will discuss this in detail in the later chapters of this book.

Although we are still in the introduction, I would like to give in to the temptation to refer to a diagram which describes the relationship between the single *elements* (the small lower squares in Figure 2) and the *system* (the larger upper rectangle). More precisely, it illustrates how a “field” or even a system is created from individual small actions. The picture helped me to understand the phenomenon of the self-organisation of communication systems in general and of conflict systems in particular: two parties (individuals or groups) generate their own communication system from their interactions (sometimes we might jokingly say in this context, “Uh oh – it looks like you’ve ‘created a monster’!” about the pattern they have generated in the course of their communication history, see Chapter 14). Once this “monster” has emerged – and this is the interesting thing – it begins to control the interactions, and the options available to the participants become increasingly limited. This leads Luhmann to speak of a “highly integrated social system” in which communication options are ever more restricted (Luhmann, 1996, p. 479).

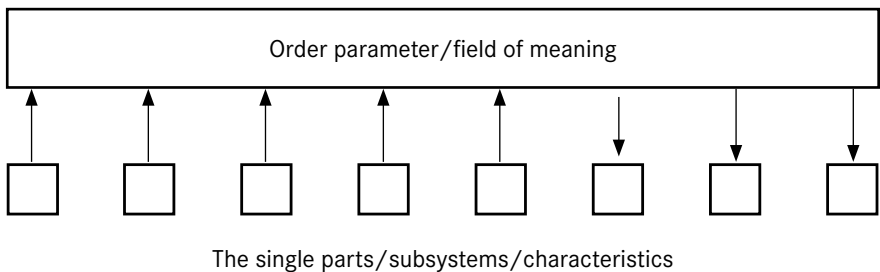


Figure 2: Pattern formation as a circular process (Kriz, 2009, p. 637).

The small squares represent the single interactions: all the example sentences given previously. The large rectangle above has been created by these interactions (arrows go first from the bottom to the top) and has thus become an ‘order parameter’ (Haken, 1992). Although only the initial interactions formed the ordering pattern or field of meaning, after some time this pattern in turn

determines further interactions (arrows from top to bottom). Imagine a melody which is initially formed from single tones but once the melody is established it determines which tones fit and which do not. The melody now “governs” the tones; a sentence “governs” the words and, once a conflict has arisen, it “governs” or reigns subsequent interactions (see chapter 17); of course, the process is much more complex than with melodies. Kriz cites a simple, particularly illustrative example: in the applause after a concert, we have all experienced how all of a sudden, out of nowhere, hundreds of unconnected clapping motions transform into a rhythmic pattern. Everyone claps to the same rhythm and, although the rhythm had emerged from the clapping movements, it now in turn controls the clapping movements. The pattern emerges spontaneously and rapidly dissolves again (Kriz, 2017b, p. 107).

We see similar self-organising phenomena in other situations, for example, at the start of a weekend seminar you look for your seat. After the break, you sit there again, but after lunch, someone else is sitting there. You are irritated: “Hey, this is ‘my’ seat!” How the situation unfolds from there may depend on whether the seminar in question is about group-dynamics, team building or business ... The important point is that patterns emerge from manners of behaving and communicating. These, in turn, influence those same behaviours and communications. This is less problematic with simple, fleeting patterns in interaction systems, but can become quite dramatic when two parties communicate together in a conflict system.

## 1.2 Symmetry and complementarity

Through their interactions, the actors have now created a *field*, a circular self-reinforcing conflict system that leads into a dynamic of increasing escalation.<sup>8</sup> We can imagine how it will continue if there are no brakes: after all, one of them has already threatened to go to the sea alone, if necessary, and they seem unlikely to send each other friendly postcards from their separate holidays. Thus, we suspect that the separate holidays will perhaps lead to a more permanent separation and the end of the relationship (love had already disappeared some time ago). This is then one possible way for a conflict to end – with the

8 As a counsellor, when dealing with circular dynamics it is advisable to resist being drawn into believing the claims of any one particular side about what the start point of a “cycle” may have been (“She started it!” – “No, he did!”). “In principle, if you want to explain or understand anything in human behavior, you are always dealing with total circuits, completed circuits” (Bateson, 1972, p. 465; see also Nagel, 2021). We come back to this topic in Chapter 6.1.