Family Emotions and Conflicts: Galtung's Theory and Daniel Goleman

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the role of emotions in family conflicts and their articulation with the household's communication, power, rules, and hierarchies, placing in dialogue Johan Galtung's theory of violence —direct, structural, and cultural— and Daniel Goleman's model of emotional intelligence. A qualitative, interpretive, cross-sectional design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine key informants in Cúcuta (Norte de Santander, Colombia) —three children, three parents, and three experts in family conflict— and analyzed through discourse analysis across five categories. The findings show that, in the moment of conflict, fear and sadness are frequently expressed as anger and shouting, revealing a deficit in emotional self-awareness; that emotional regulation tends to occur only afterwards, "with a cool head," chiefly through physical retreat; and that participants themselves name a cultural substrate that normalizes violence ("hitting educates," inherited authoritarian parenting), consistent with Galtung's notion of cultural violence. Structural violence appears in unequal, sometimes economically enforced decision-making, while a "false calm" exemplifies negative peace. All family participants expressed a desire for emotional-regulation training. The study concludes that intelligent emotional management operates as a resource of positive peace, and proposes a strategy grounded in emotional education, nonviolent communication, family mediation, and role reconfiguration.

Keywords: emotions; family conflict; structural violence; cultural violence; emotional intelligence; positive peace; Galtung; Goleman.

1. Introduction

The family constitutes the primary space of socialization and the first environment in which human beings learn to name, express, and regulate their emotions. Precisely because of its centrality, the home is also a privileged stage for conflict: within it circulate affections, expectations, norms, and power relations that, when they find no healthy channels of expression, may lead to sustained tensions and to forms of violence. How emotions are managed in those moments is not merely a psychological matter: it concerns the construction of peace at its most everyday level.

The scale of the problem is considerable. Globally, family and intimate-partner violence is one of the most widespread forms of aggression (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023; UN Women, 2023). In Colombia, the Single Registry of Victims records more than nine million people

affected by the armed conflict, and national figures for intrafamily violence remain high (UARIV, 2024; Colombian Observatory of Women [OCM], 2024). Violence is thus reproduced not only in the great scenarios of conflict, but also within the intimate fabric of households.

To understand that reproduction, this study draws on Johan Galtung's theory of violence, which distinguishes direct, structural, and cultural violence, and holds that lasting peace requires transforming the structures and cultures that legitimize aggression (Galtung, 1990; Winter, 2012). To that framework it adds Daniel Goleman's model of emotional intelligence (1995), whose competencies —self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills— are associated with more constructive conflict resolution (Halperin, 2014; Low et al., 2019). Placing both in dialogue articulates the structural plane —the conditions that produce violence— with the plane of competencies —the resources people can mobilize to transform it.

The study is situated in Cúcuta, the urban border hub of northeastern Colombia, shaped by migration, precarity, and the aftermath of the armed conflict (National Planning Department [DNP], 2024; USAID, 2024). Against this backdrop, the article pursues three aims: (a) to describe the role of emotions in family conflicts in relation to communication, power, rules, and hierarchies; (b) to contrast Galtung's theory of structural and cultural violence with Goleman's emotional intelligence in light of empirical data; and (c) to propose an emotional-approach strategy for the peaceful transformation of conflict. The guiding question is: what is the role of emotions in the way family conflicts are resolved through communication, rules, power, and hierarchies, interpreted from Galtung's theory?

2. State of the Art

This section reviews prior research on emotion regulation, family dynamics, and conflict resolution, organized in international, national, and regional references, in order to situate the present study and identify gaps in the literature.

2.1. International references

A systematic review by Lancastle et al. (2024) analyzed the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving emotion regulation in children, adolescents, and adults. Despite high methodological heterogeneity, programs incorporating emotional-skills training, role-play, and family psychoeducation showed significant improvements in regulation and reductions in disruptive behavior, with multicomponent interventions —integrating family, school, and community— proving most effective. This supports the pertinence of integral emotional-education strategies that involve both the individual and their environment. Complementarily, Roman et al. (2025) reviewed interventions to strengthen family bonds and reduce domestic conflict, concluding that combining emotional psychoeducation, communicative mediation, and community networks significantly decreases family conflict and sustains change over time.

At the theoretical level, Bartolucci (2024) revisited contemporary conceptualizations of peace from Galtung to more recent approaches, arguing that social and family conflicts cannot be understood only through visible violence but require attention to the structural and cultural factors that reproduce inequality —a framework that grounds the present analysis. Robles Mendoza et al. (2023) examined emotional experiences and family relationships during the COVID-19 confinement with a gender emphasis, finding that lockdown increased stress, anxiety, and frustration while also revealing resilience strategies. Finally, García-Zambrano (2022) found that adolescents from more cohesive, communicative families displayed more assertive conflict-resolution styles, whereas those from more dysfunctional environments tended toward avoidant or aggressive coping.

2.2. National and regional references

In Colombia, Canales Ramírez et al. (2024) confirmed the bidimensional structure of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire —cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression— and found that reappraisal is associated with greater

psychological well-being while suppression relates to poorer outcomes, an empirical distinction directly relevant to the regulation-versus-repression argument developed here. At the regional level, several studies document the local relevance of the problem in Cúcuta: Alarcón Rojas et al. (2023) analyzed factors of intrafamily violence against women; Caicedo Camacho and Estupiñán Quintero (2022) and Morales Rangel and Tamí (2022) examined the rise of domestic and gender violence during the pandemic; and Galvis Velandia et al. (2022) assessed family functionality in vulnerable neighborhoods using Olson's circumplex model. Together, these antecedents confirm both the pertinence of studying family emotional dynamics and a gap: the scarcity of qualitative work articulating emotions with Galtung's structural–cultural lens in this border territory.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Galtung's theory of violence

Galtung (1990) articulates violence in three interrelated forms. Direct violence is visible physical or verbal aggression. Structural violence is the systematic inequality built into relations, which prevents people from developing their capabilities; it is slow and often invisible (Winter, 2012). Cultural violence encompasses beliefs, attitudes, and symbols that justify the other two forms. Lasting peace —positive peace— is achieved not by merely ceasing visible violence —a mere negative peace— but by transforming the structures and cultures that perpetuate it. Figure 1 illustrates this triad applied to the family.

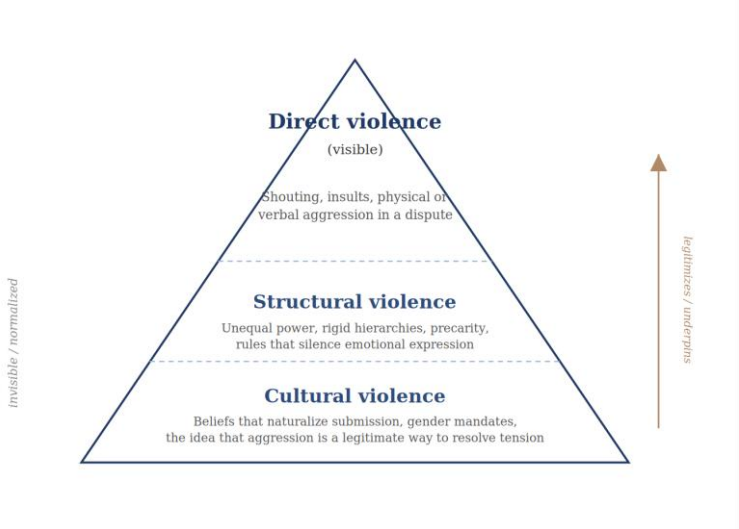

Figure 1. Galtung's violence triangle applied to the family.

Note. Own elaboration based on Galtung (1990).

3.2. Goleman's emotional intelligence

Goleman (1995) proposes that emotional intelligence comprises five competencies —self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills— decisive for well-being and the quality of bonds. Self-regulation, in particular, allows individuals to cope with stress and resolve conflicts peacefully. Empirical research supports that emotional intelligence is an effective means of conflict resolution (Winardi et al., 2021), that regulating discrete emotions reshapes conflict processes (Halperin, 2014), and that emotion-regulation strategies during couple conflict produce a spillover on subsequent family functioning (Low et al., 2019). Crucially, emotional intelligence is a trainable competency (Baghdadi et al., 2024; Paskewitz, 2021), which turns the transformation of family conflict into an attainable pedagogical objective. The family system in which these competencies operate is organized around communication, power, rules, and hierarchies (Minuchin, 1974; Satir, 1988; Haley, 1976).

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach oriented toward understanding social phenomena from the perceptions and meanings constructed by the subjects (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2023). Its design is cross-sectional, descriptive, and propositional (Restrepo, 2024).

4.1. Participants

Nine key informants were selected through purposive, voluntary sampling in Cúcuta, distributed in three population points to enable triangulation, as shown in Table 1. Families were composed of a couple and at least one child.

Table 1 Description of key informants

Code	Profile	Role in triangulation
P1–P3	Children / adolescents of the families	Lived experience of the child
P4–P6	Parents	Lived experience of the parent
P7–P9	Experts in family conflict (incl. Family Ombudsman's Office)	Professional / institutional view

Note. Own elaboration.

4.2. Techniques and analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews —which allow personal experiences to be explored in depth (Taylor & Bogdan, 2024)— comprising 24 questions distributed across the five analytical categories. The material was examined through discourse analysis, identifying elements of structural and cultural violence and latent meanings in everyday language (Van Dijk, 2023). Rigor rested on population triangulation (children, parents, experts), informed consent following the ethical principles of the APA and Colombian regulations, and expert judgment to validate the instruments. The five categories and their subcategories are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Categories and subcategories of analysis

Category	Subcategories	Reference
1. Emotions	Fear, sadness, anger, hope, frustration, reconciliation	Damasio
2. Emotional intelligence	Self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, social skills	Goleman
3. Conflict (Galtung)	Direct, structural, cultural violence; negative and positive peace	Galtung
4. Family	Communication, power, rules, hierarchies	Minuchin
5. Strategies	Family mediation, nonviolent communication, emotion-regulation workshops, role reconfiguration	Rosenberg

Note. Own elaboration. Quotations in the Results section are translated from Spanish by the author; informant codes follow Table 1.

5. Results

The findings are presented by category. Illustrative excerpts —translated from the original Spanish— are identified by informant code (P1–P9).

5.1. Category 1: Emotions

Across the six emotions explored, a consistent pattern emerged: intense affects are experienced bodily but expressed through a single dominant channel. Fear appeared mainly in children and was tied to physical punishment and its bodily correlates —P3 reported "my body was shaking a lot, I felt a lot of fear that he was going to hit

me hard," adding that this fear led to submission: "I obeyed, I can't answer back." Experts framed this fear structurally: it is activated by "threats of abandonment, loss of custody, physical or psychological violence" and, in children, by witnessing violence between parents —what P9 named "vicarious violence."

Sadness typically surfaced after the episode, when "the storm of the fight passes" and the harm becomes visible (P9); in parents it took the form of guilt and self-blame ("the frustration of feeling that they failed as protectors," P9). Anger, by contrast, was the emotion most readily acted out —through shouting, reproaches, and slammed doors— and was triggered in parents by disobedience or poor school performance and in children by "authoritarian imposition without dialogue" (P9). Hope and reconciliation converged on the same condition: the recognition of error and the presence of dialogue or professional help. As P5 put it, "when I talked with him and he understood... he admitted his mistake." The most analytically significant observation, voiced by the expert P9, is that families "confuse fear or sadness with anger; a father who is sad or frightened about his child's future usually expresses it by shouting." This undifferentiated expression is examined further in Category 2.

5.2. Category 2: Emotional intelligence

Self-awareness was described as initially deficient and, tellingly, delayed. Several participants could only name what they felt "afterwards," once calm returned: P5 stated "not in the moment; later, with a cool head, one analyzes the situation," and P2 similarly recognized sadness or anger only "after thinking and reflecting." Children identified emotions chiefly through bodily signs —"heat in my face," "my heart raced." Regarding self-regulation, the predominant strategy was physical retreat: "I go to my room to calm down" (P4), "I prefer to leave and then come back" (P5). Experts contrasted what worsens the situation — shouting back, the "silent treatment," exploding— with what helps: "time-out," deep breathing, and "speaking from what one feels instead of blaming" (P9).

Motivation to repair centered on affective bonds and the children's well-being ("I want her to be a professional, not to repeat the story I lived," P4), with experts adding, in institutional cases, "fear of the law" and emotional exhaustion. Empathy was described by experts as "the engine of change": "when a parent understands that the child's rebellion is not an attack but a sign of pain, they stop defending themselves" (P9); notably, parents who had endured harsh childhoods drew on that experience to empathize with their children (P4, P5). Social skills —listening and assertive speech— were seen as decisive, yet frequently absent in the moment: P2 observed "there is no listening because of the shouting; we talk at the same time." Figure 2 synthesizes the emotional cycle that emerges from these accounts.

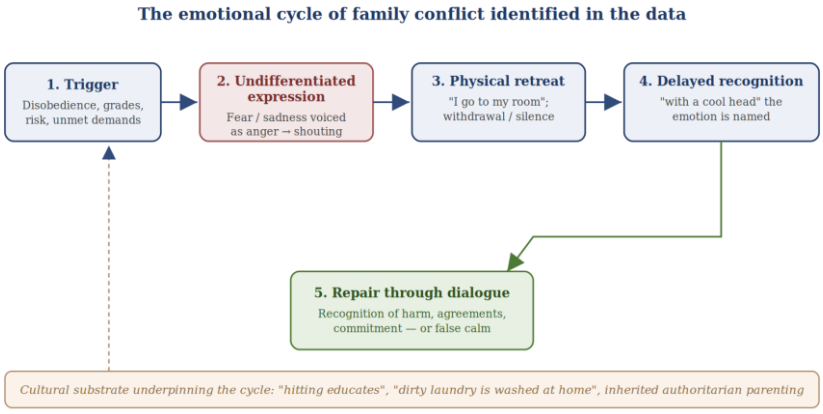

Figure 2. The emotional cycle of family conflict identified in the data.

Note. Own elaboration based on the interviews.

5.3. Category 3: Conflict — Galtung's typology

The three forms of violence were clearly identifiable in the data. Direct violence appeared as shouting, insults, and hitting —P4 admitted "sometimes I shout at her... I have hit her"— and experts enumerated "physical blows, shaking, and even attempts to strangle" among the cases they handle. Structural violence surfaced in decision-making: while some families described shared decisions, others reflected unilateral authority ("I hold command, I make the decisions," P4), and experts underscored historically male dominance and economic control —"here things are done as I say because I pay for everything" (P9)— alongside the silencing of women's and children's opinions.

Cultural violence yielded the study's most striking convergence with theory, because participants themselves named the mechanism of normalization. Children noticed it —"my mom shouts at me and insults me, and for her it is normal because she was raised that way" (P3)— and parents recounted their own upbringing "by the belt" (P6) and "being hit, and if you let yourself be hit they hit you more" (P5). The expert P7 articulated it in almost Galtungian terms: "the biggest myth is normalizing violence as if it were something ordinary... 'it happened to me, it's normal.'" Importantly, some parents were consciously trying to break the cycle: "I want to be a better mother, not to repeat my upbringing, which was all shouting" (P4). Finally, negative peace was captured in the notion of a "false calm" —"believing there is peace only because everyone stays silent out of fear" (P9)— whereas positive peace was tied to jointly built agreements: "the agreement works when the family itself designs it; if an authority imposes it by force, it is much harder to fulfill" (P9).

5.4. Category 4: Family

Communication in conflict was repeatedly described as shouting-based and lacking listening; experts catalogued toxic patterns including using children as messengers, absolutes ("you always," "you never"), and "attacking the person, not the problem" (P9). Power was generally held by parents and could be exercised authoritatively; P7 noted that "the man is still the authoritarian head," while P9 described coalitions and even inverted hierarchies in which children control the home. On rules, families that managed conflict better tended to have clear norms —P5's household rule was "always tell the truth, whether good or bad"— and experts recommended "clear, known, reasonable norms" and "zero tolerance for insult or hitting as a corrective method." Regarding hierarchies, experts insisted that parents must lead the change while giving children voice: "the parents have the main obligation to lead the change because they are the protective adults" (P9).

5.5. Category 5: Strategies and suggestions

Attitudes toward family mediation were mixed among families —P2 resisted external involvement ("these are matters of this house") and P6 had "never sought professional help"— whereas experts strongly endorsed a neutral third party that "returns to the family the power to solve its own problems" (P9). On nonviolent communication, most families acknowledged communicating "with shouting and accusations" (P1, P2, P4, P6), and experts described NVC as "a disarmer of conflict" that substitutes "the language of demand and punishment" for "the language of connection" (P9). The clearest result concerned emotion-regulation workshops: every family participant expressed a desire to learn to manage emotions better —P1 wished to "learn to control anger when we fight," P5 to "speak slowly and calmly"— and experts deemed such workshops "fundamental" for breaking the intergenerational transmission of violence. Finally, on role reconfiguration, P5 reported changing his own conduct ("I no longer go out drinking... so as not to set a bad example"), and experts linked overloaded, inequitably distributed roles to conflict, recommending an "equitable, clear, age-appropriate" distribution.

6. Discussion

The results allow the two frameworks to be articulated around a guiding idea: emotions are the meeting point between structure and subject. Figure 3 synthesizes this conceptual model.

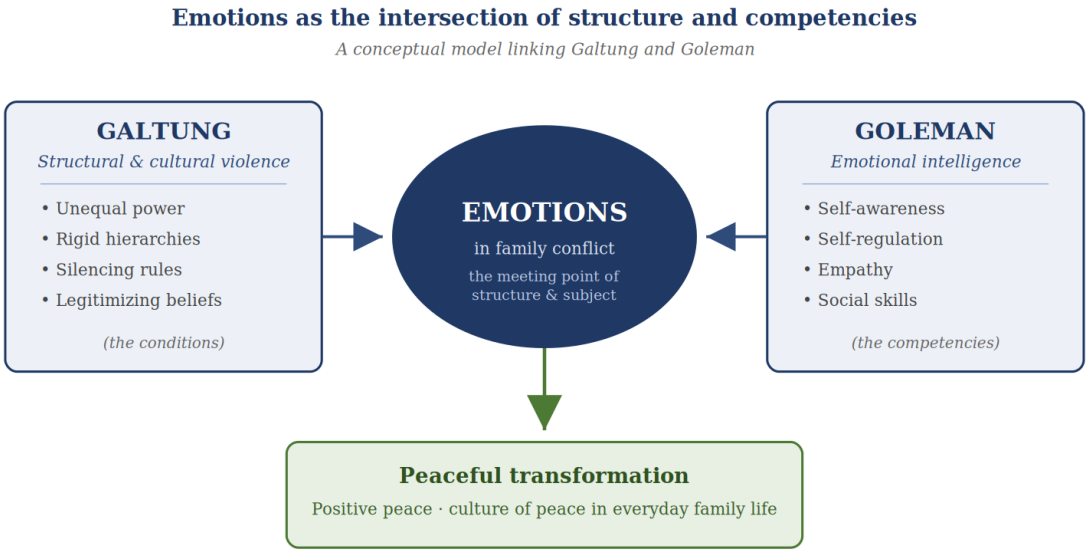

Figure 3. Emotions as the intersection of structure and competencies: a conceptual model linking Galtung and Goleman.

Note. Own elaboration.

A first convergence concerns invisibility. Galtung holds that structural and cultural violence is dangerous because it is normalized; Goleman notes that a lack of self-awareness prevents recognition of one's own affective states. The data unite both claims: participants only recognized emotions "with a cool head," and the confusion of fear and sadness with anger (P9) is simultaneously an emotional-awareness deficit and a cultural script that authorizes shouting. Making the invisible visible —naming the emotion and naming the inherited belief that "hitting educates"— thus emerges as the first transformative step. The fact that participants themselves articulated the normalization of violence (P3, P5, P6, P7) is strong empirical confirmation of Galtung's concept of cultural violence.

A second convergence concerns the distinction between negative and positive peace. The "false calm" described by P9 —silence out of fear— is the emotional analogue of expressive suppression, which the national evidence associates with poorer outcomes (Canales Ramírez et al., 2024) and which the international literature links to worse conflict resolution (Low et al., 2019). Positive peace, by contrast, corresponds to the regulation —not the repression— of emotions and to jointly constructed agreements, echoing findings that cohesive, communicative families resolve conflict more assertively (García-Zambrano, 2022). A third convergence concerns transformability: Galtung conceives peace as constructible and Goleman conceives emotional intelligence as trainable. The unanimous demand for emotion-regulation workshops, together with P5's self-initiated role change, indicates that the families are not passive but already oriented toward transformation —consistent with evidence that multicomponent, family-centered interventions are the most effective (Lancastle et al., 2024; Roman et al., 2025). Table 3 summarizes these convergences as read through the data.

Table 3 Convergences between Galtung and Goleman as read through the data

Axis	Reading from the data	Theoretical articulation
Visibility	Fear/sadness confused with anger; "it's normal, I was raised that way"	Self-awareness (Goleman) denaturalizes cultural violence (Galtung)
Type of peace	"False calm" / silence out of fear vs. jointly built agreements	Repression = negative peace; regulation = positive peace
Transformability	Unanimous demand for workshops; self-initiated role change (P5)	Trainable competency (Goleman) transforms structures (Galtung)
Bond	Empathy as "the engine of change"; love as motivation	Empathy transforms unequal power into shared problem-solving

Note. Own elaboration.

7. Proposed Emotional-Approach Strategy

Building on the findings, a four-component strategy is proposed, sensitive to the border context of Cúcuta and directly responsive to the demands voiced by participants.

- **Family emotional education.** Workshops developing Goleman's five competencies, prioritizing the identification and naming of emotions in the moment —addressing the observed deficit whereby recognition arrives only "with a cool head" (Bisquerra, 2003; Baghdadi et al., 2024).
- **Nonviolent communication (NVC).** Rosenberg's model to replace the "shouting and accusations" that participants themselves reported with the expression of observations, feelings, needs, and requests, reducing verbal escalation.
- **Role reconfiguration.** Revising implicit rules and power structures that generate emotional exclusion, promoting equitable, age-appropriate distribution of responsibilities and functional rather than authoritarian hierarchies (Minuchin, 1974).
- **Family mediation.** Facilitated dialogue led by the least aggressive member at home or by a professional in institutional settings, oriented toward building an everyday positive peace rather than a false calm.

Consistent with Galtung, the strategy intervenes in the cultural and structural causes; consistent with Goleman, it does so by strengthening concrete, trainable competencies.

8. Conclusions

This study shows that, in the families interviewed in Cúcuta, emotions occupy a central place in the emergence and resolution of conflict, and that emotional dysregulation is not an isolated individual failure but an everyday expression of a cultural and structural violence that participants themselves recognize as normalized. The joint reading of Galtung and Goleman proves fruitful: emotion is the meeting point between structure and subject, so that intervening in a family's emotional competencies also bears on the cultural microstructure that reproduces or deactivates violence.

Three empirically grounded conclusions follow. First, the confusion of fear and sadness with anger, and the delayed recognition of emotions, reveal a self-awareness deficit that constitutes a concrete and trainable point of intervention. Second, the participants' own naming of a "false calm" and of inherited authoritarian parenting confirms, from lived experience, Galtung's distinction between negative peace and cultural violence. Third, the unanimous demand for emotional-regulation training indicates that a family culture of peace is an attainable pedagogical task rather than an inaccessible ideal.

The study's limitations —a small purposive sample and the interpretive nature of discourse analysis— mean its findings are illustrative rather than generalizable, and warrant validation through the participants' own review and future broader fieldwork. Nonetheless, recognizing the home as a key space in the reproduction or transformation of violence remains the most fertile step for thinking about peace from its very root.

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