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Under what conditions does ethnic conflict result in armed conflict?

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By going to an ethnic festival, eating the cuisine, seeing dancing and hearing music we have never seen or heard before, we get a glimpse of the meaning of ethnic identity. We taste, see and hear a group different from our own. We are likely to stand in wonder, appreciating this diversity. But we might feel perplexed to imagine how these differences in identity can result in armed conflict.

In this chapter, we aim to advance understanding of when ethnic conflict leads to armed violence. People who are part of an ethnic group have unique cultures. They have common social mores (such as expectations that spouses will be of that culture), an identifiable cuisine (such as a selection of curries), and traditions that set them apart from other groups (such as celebrating certain holidays). In addition to cultural traditions, people with a specific ethnic identity (such as the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka) often have a predominant religious affiliation (in this case, Buddhism) and an accompanying language (Sinhala). For simplicity, in this chapter we will refer to these three markers of identity—ethnicity, religion and culture—as "ethnic."

We begin with a brief survey of the potential for ethnic conflict that leads to the recognition that ethnic differences relatively seldom develop to the point of armed violence. We follow Petersen's (2011) analysis of ethnic conflict in Kosovo to argue that emotional reactions to ethnic status reversals may be a major reason ethnic conflict becomes violent. We add to this Posner's (1983) conception of a "security dilemma" as a further explanation. We then apply a security-dilemma status-reversal perspective to the civil war in Syria. Finally, we relate this perspective to the rate of infection in a stock and flow model as used commonly in epidemiology.

Ethnicity and Nationalism: The Potential for Conflict

The sheer number of ethnic groups would suggest that potential for ethnic conflict is substantial. Anthropologists tell us that there are perhaps as many as 5,000 ethnic "nations" based on common ancestry, language, culture, and territory (Nietschmann 1987). Of these, about 600 may be populous enough, and sufficiently concentrated on a territory, to seek some kind of political representation or power.

In contrast to nations, "states" are territories governed by a political power. There are currently 193 states recognized as members of the United Nations. Of these, only 45 are actually ethnic nation-states (such as Iceland and the Koreas) that have less than ten percent ethnic minorities (Nielsson and Jones 1988). Thus there are about 555 ethnic groups that might contest political power within nearly 150 states that include sizeable ethnic minorities.

Of course, ethnic conflict can take nonviolent forms, such as civil rights protests, as well as unorganized forms of violence, such as ethnic riots. An extreme form of ethnic violence is genocide, in which one ethnic group, frequently a group with the power of a state, attempts to destroy another ethnic group. It is likely that these disparate forms of ethnic conflict have at least somewhat different social-psychological mechanisms at work. In this chapter, therefore, we focus on ethnic violence between armed groups.

According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, there were 40 armed conflicts in 2014—six in Europe, six in the Middle East, 14 in Asia, 12 in Africa, and 2 in the Americas (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015, 539). Without getting into debates about what conflict should count as ethnic, we are confident that the great majority of the 40 armed conflicts are ethnic based on or include a strong ethnic component. Even 40 continuing armed ethnic conflicts are few, however, compared to 600 actual or potential ethnic nation-states.

The numbers reviewed above indicate that the potential for ethnic conflict, at least for armed conflict, is much greater than the conflict observed. It is easy to exaggerate the extent to which ethnic differences turn to violence. It is important, therefore, to develop a more specific understanding of when ethnic differences and tensions turn to armed violence.

The Mystery of Ethnic Identity and Nationalism

There have been many attempts to define ethnicity and nation, most focusing on material and objective characteristics. Here, in English translation, is a definition from Joseph Stalin: "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture" (Stalin 1973, 57).

Notice that even Stalin, stalwart materialist that he was, included reference to "psychological make-up." Still, Stalin's definition would make Somalia as much a nation as Japan. Like Japanese, Somalis are a historically constituted stable community with a common language, territory, economic life, and culture. But for Somalis, their political identification is with their clan; there is no Somali nation.

Scholars have come to recognize that the core of ethnicity and nation is psychological. As Conner notes, "The essence of the nation is not tangible. It is psychological, a matter of attitude rather than of fact" (1972, 42). Anderson points out that a nation "is an imagined political community…limited and sovereign" (1983, 6). And Gurr argues that "[w]hat is common to all politically active communal groups is the appeal to an underlying sense of collective identity based on a common culture and status" (1993, 4-5).

For our purposes, a nation is a self-recognizing, self-reproducing group that seeks to gain or maintain political power which, at maximum, means the sovereignty of an independent state. An ethnic group is a self-recognizing, self-reproducing group that perceives members related by a common history, with a common descent, that is, by blood. Some ethnic groups aim for political power, in which case they become nations—ethnic nations. Many Jews see Israel as an ethnic nation—a land only for Jews and not Palestinians. The United States is a nation but not an ethnic nation. As already noted, few nation-states are sufficiently homogenous in ethnicity to be literally ethnic nations.

The Foundation of Intergroup Conflict: The Psychology of Identification

The social sciences of the 21st century are dominated by competing versions of rational choice theories. In these theories, human behavior is governed by a utilitarian calculus that aims to maximize gain and minimize loss. In principle, rational choice theory could account for every kind of loss and gain, but in practice the theory is usually limited to material losses and gains in order to make objective predictions. Rational choice theorists do not deny that emotions exist, but they deny that emotions are in the causal stream that leads to behavior. In rational choice theory, emotions are thus epiphenomenal; what counts is "what's in it for me and mine, right now" with the focus on material well-being.

There is reason to doubt this denial of the power of emotions. One broad challenge to the rational choice perspective emerges from the simple fact that human beings care enormously for things that have little to do with material well-being. We care about pets: there are numerous accounts of individuals refusing rescue from a flood unless their dog or cat can get in the boat with them. We care enough about fictional characters of print and film to shed a tear over Tiny

Tim in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843). We follow the lives of film and rock stars whose well-being does nothing for our material welfare.

Important for understanding intergroup conflict is the ease with which humans can care about groups of strangers. For many people, Monday is good or bad depending on what happened to their sports team on Sunday afternoon. Identification with sports teams is not just all in our minds: comparison of sports fans before and after a big game indicates that fans of the winning team show an increase in testosterone while fans of the losing team show a decrease (Bernhardt et al. 1998). Members of winning and losing teams show the same changes in testosterone levels (Oliveira 2009).

Especially important for understanding intergroup violence, including willingness of group members to suffer and die for the group, is the ease with which human beings identify even with ethnic and national groups numbering in the millions. These millions are strangers whose material well-being has little to do with our own. This is the sense in which Anderson (1983) defined a nation as "an imagined community."

Identification thus means caring about the well-being of others: pets, film-stars, athletes, sports teams, ethnic and national groups (McCauley 2001). Identification is not quite the same as empathy; we do not feel exactly what the other is feeling. Rather we feel positive emotions—pride, joy—when the other is well, safe, and prospering; we feel negative emotions—anger, shame, fear—when the other is threatened, diminished, or humiliated.

What is Special about Identification with an Ethnic Group?

Early in the 20th century, many believed that economic interest would henceforth be the dominant source of political conflict and intergroup violence. This Marxist construction of

politics was already obviously insufficient when members of "international" labor unions volunteered to die in the trenches in World War I despite union leaders' warnings against joining a "capitalist war."

Anti-colonial rebellions after WWII demonstrated the special mobilizing power of ethnic nationalism. As late as 1983, a devout socialist such as Benedict Anderson (1983) could still be amazed at wars between socialist states (Vietnam, Cambodia, China in 1978-79), but by the end of the 20th century, the political power of ethnic nationalism was generally acknowledged. There is every reason to believe that this power continues in the 21st century.

The power of ethnic identification is evident in five observations: 1) Ethnicity mobilizes sacrifice for the group. 2) Ethnicity is easier to mobilize for intergroup conflict than economic interest or other shared identities. 3) History is a crucial issue in mobilization for ethnic conflict; an ethnic group perceives itself related not only by blood descent but by a common history. 4) Perceived threat is the immediate occasion of ethnic mobilization for violence. When the threat involves territory, there may be a "sons of the soil" conflict to the extent that one ethnic group perceives a sacred entitlement to territory (Fearon 2004). 5) Double minorities, where two ethnic groups in conflict can both see themselves as an endangered minority, are the most intractable ethnic conflicts (Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, Jews and Palestinians in Palestine).

Here we briefly speculate about the sources of the special mobilizing power of ethnicity (McCauley, 2001). One possibility is that perceived common descent means that ethnic group members gain a kind of immortality, just as parents gain a kind of immortality in their children. This was Anderson's suggestion: "…in Western Europe the 18th century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought. …. What then was

required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning" (1983, 11).

A second possibility, related to the first, is that ethnicity is easier to essentialize. An essence is the hidden something that makes a living thing what it is. An albino tiger with three legs is still a tiger; it has still the essence of the tiger. An adult believes herself the same person—the same essence—she was at five years old despite many changes in appearance and behavior. Similarly, large groups of people can be seen as sharing an essence: "we are basically good," "they are basically evil." It seems likely that perceived descent groups are more easily seen as having a shared essence, in which case an individual has a personal stake in the well-being of his or her ethnic group that does not exist for members of an economic class or labor union.

The third possibility is that ethnic groups are easier to see, that is, psychologically more salient. Campbell (1958) used the complex term "entitativity" to describe the degree to which a group is perceptually a single entity. Gestalt characteristics of proximity, similarity, common fate, and sharp boundary together determine the entitativity of a group. A marching military unit, in uniform, has high entitativity; a crowd getting off a subway has low entitativity. Ethnic groups often have similarities of appearance, dress, food, music, and ritual that give them higher entitativity than the motley members of a labor union. The assumption here is that it is easier to sacrifice for something that is perceptually more salient—something seen as more real and more substantial.

The Emotional Power of Status Reversal: Kosovo

A recent demonstration of the political power of ethnicity is from the Balkans, where the state of Yugoslavia broke into ethnic pieces after Josip Broz Tito died in 1980. In the province of Kosovo, the conflict between Serbs and ethnic Albanians brought violence, ethnic cleansing, and reverse ethnic cleansing. Roger Petersen's book, *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict* (2011), describes Western intervention in Kosovo as a contest between Western carrot-and-stick incentives for peace *versus* local resistance to these incentives based in intergroup emotions.

In the 1960s, a Serbian minority (predominantly Serbian Orthodox) controlled an ethnic Albanian (predominantly nominally Muslim) majority in Kosovo. By 1981, in political space no longer dominated by the deceased Tito, ethnic Albanians were dominant in government, education, and mass media. This was a status reversal in which Serbs went from dominant to subordinate. In 1990-91, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic sent troops into Kosovo, and government and education were again dominated by Serbs (second status reversal). Ethnic Albanians responded by dropping out of Serbian controlled institutions to develop a parallel society. They developed their own ethnic Albanian education and government institutions (third status reversal). In 1998, after the U.S. brokered Dayton Accords ignored Kosovo, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began attacking Serbian police and government officials. Serbs responded with violence, including some indiscriminate attacks on ethnic Albanians. In 1999, Serbian forces killed perhaps 10,000 ethnic Albanians, producing approximately 800,000 ethnic Albanian refugees (fourth status reversal). In the summer of 1999, NATO bombing in Kosovo and Serbia pushed Serb forces from Kosovo; the KLA moved in and drove approximately 230,000 Serbs from Kosovo (fifth status reversal).

As Petersen (2011) describes, each status reversal was accompanied by powerful emotions. The side gaining status felt pride while the side losing status felt fear of winners' revenge, anger at the injustice and shame for not doing enough to reverse the loss. It is likely that group status loss is experienced as group humiliation, which is not a separate emotion but a corrosive combination of anger and shame (McCauley, in press). Some analysts believe that contempt and disgust are also associated with ethnic conflict (Matsumoto, Hwang, and Frank 2012).

Strategic use of emotions in Kosovo included manipulation of Western emotions. KLA leaders attacked Serbian police in 1998 with the expectation that Serbia would overreact (which has been labeled *jujitsu politics*; McCauley and Moskalenko 2011, 149-160) and that the Western response to ethnic Albanian suffering would give ethnic Albanians the state they desired (Peterson 2011). This expectation proved to be correct.

In this case, ethnic Albanians intended and instigated ethnic Albanian suffering in order to manipulate the emotions of Europeans and Americans with news of Serbian violence against ethnic Albanians. Petersen suggests that Western emotions likely included fear of a flood of Albanian refugees and shame over failure to live up to the "never again" promise of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. There was "Western shame over failure to prevent atrocities in Europe" (Petersen 2011, 124-125).

Petersen's description of events in Kosovo makes it clear that Western intervention has mostly been a failure. A multiethnic state of Kosovo did not emerge; rather Kosovo was divided into an ethnic Albanian part and a (much smaller) Serbian part, with about 5,000 NATO troops still required to hold the peace in 2015 (Kosovo Force 2015). Petersen's key insight is that Western promises of economic development for cooperation and Western threats to punish

ethnic violence failed because rational choice suasion based on material incentives could not compete with the emotional power of fear, anger, and shame.

Thus it appears that strong emotions associated with ethnic status reversal, perhaps especially repeated status reversals, may predict when ethnic differences move to armed conflict. In the next section we consider another possible predictor.

Ethnic Conflict in the Context of a Security Dilemma

According to Jervis (1978, 169), "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others." An increase by one state of defensive or offensive military capacities leads other states to do the same thing. This "security dilemma" brings a paradoxical reduction in security for all.

In 1993, Posen applied the concept of security dilemma to ethnic conflict. Theoretically, the prerequisite for emergence of a security dilemma is a condition of anarchy, in which each state is responsible for its own security. Posen's insight was that the collapse of an empire or state could create an anarchic condition in which each ethnic group tries to raise its own security and in doing so threatens other groups. The rational choice framework in which the security dilemma is usually placed does not explain why individuals turn to ethnic groups in state collapse, but, as already noted, the history of conflicts in the 20th century suggests that there is special mobilizing power in ethnicity.

The conflict of Serbs and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo can be understood as arising from a security dilemma. The fighting in Kosovo followed the collapse of Yugoslavia after Tito's death. In Kosovo, the U.S. and its NATO allies attempted to resolve the security dilemma with security provided by NATO troops. But Western intervention did not produce a peaceful

multiethnic state in Kosovo; instead the result was an ongoing division between Serbs and ethnic Albanians that depends on the continuing presence of NATO troops for peacekeeping. Even reinforced with economic incentives, resolving the security dilemma was not enough: fear, anger, and shame have so far trumped rational choice alternatives to hostility and violence.

The Security Dilemma and Status Reversals in Syria and Iraq

The same security dilemma that followed Tito's death in the former Yugoslavia is found in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's death. The same emotional power of status reversal that is evident in Kosovo is found in both Iraq and Syria.

Under iron-fisted Saddam Hussein, a Muslim Sunni minority dominated and repressed a Shia majority in Iraq. The NATO intervention to remove Saddam Hussein from power, along with his Sunni-dominated Baathist party, made the Shia majority dominant in Iraq (first status reversal). Between 2006 and 2014, the U.S. tried carrots and sticks to move Shia Prime Minister Maliki toward inclusion of Sunni in Iraq's governance. From 2014 to 2016, the U.S. has been trying again with Shia Prime Minister Albadi, but Shia resistance to more inclusive politics remains strong.

In Syria, under iron-fisted President Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite minority—which some consider Shia—dominated and repressed a Sunni majority. Assad's Baathist party profited by support from Christians, Druze, and other minorities fearing Sunni power. In 2010, Hafez al-Assad died and the Arab Spring brought the beginning of revolution and civil war against Hafez's son, President Bashar al-Assad. As we write in 2016, it is mostly Sunni forces fighting against Bashar's army, which is receiving assistance from both Iran and Russia. The strongest Sunni force against the Syrian government is Islamic State (also sometimes referred to as IS,

ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh), which emerged in 2014 to control large portions of Syria with predominantly Sunni populations (status reversal). Islamic State also controls portions of Iraq with predominantly Sunni populations. Islamic State thus brought status reversal to both Syria and Iraq: a Sunni majority reversing Alawite minority dominance in Syria, and a Sunni minority reversing Shia majority dominance in Iraq. Even Sunni who do not appreciate the extremist form of Islam advanced by Islamic State will likely continue to support Islamic State—or its successor—as the only alternative to fear and humiliation imposed by Shia (al Dagher and Kaltenthaler 2016; Moaveni 2015; Tobia 2011).

An additional example of status reversal in Iraq and Syria is that the Kurds in Iraq have reversed Sunni dominance and repression under Saddam Hussein to form a fragile mini-state of their own. Christians, Yazidis and other minority ethnic groups have been "cleansed" by Islamic State from territories it controls. The fear, anger, and shame that come with status reversal are widespread across ethnic groups in what used to be Syria and Iraq.

Islamic State is supported in Iraq and Syria by Sunnis to the extent that they see it as their only defense against domination and humiliation by Shia (Arango 2016). Similarly Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, Yazidis and other minorities have emotional residues of ethnic violence that will not easily be overcome by Western efforts to restore Syria and Iraq as centralized multiethnic states.

[Figure 1 about here]

An Epidemiological Model of Ethnic Conflict

Consider a basic epidemiological model (Kermack and McKendrick 1927) of ethnic violence (Figure 1), a component of a systems model for the prevention of war (Wiist 2014, Figure 1). The rectangles symbolize accumulations. The double-triangles signify rates of flows. The general population is represented by the small cloud on the left (the source). In the spread of disease, part of the general population flows into the accumulation of susceptible people. From there, some of the susceptible people become infected. In our case, the infection is a disease manifested in armed inter-ethnic violence. Recovery occurs when the violence ends or, more aptly, when there has been restorative justice (when past wrongs are acknowledged and measures are taken to address them) in establishing right relationships (when people are treated equitably).

When it comes to ethnicity, the flow of people from the general population to being part of the accumulation of susceptible people involves some form of deprivation based on identity, such as discrimination, humiliation, or the abuse of human rights. But, for the most part, this does not result in armed violence. Rather, certain conditions have overwhelming influence on the rate of infection. Namely, when a deprived ethnic group has suffered one or more status reversals or is facing a security dilemma, or both, there is a high propensity for armed violence. And this tends to be rather "sticky" in the sense that inter-ethnic hostility and collective memory tend to maintain the emotional foundations for violence. External powers, despite the use of material incentives and disincentives to encourage a multi-ethnic state, are relatively impotent in reversing this ethnic-polarization stickiness.

Conclusion

If a security dilemma situation and status reversal are predictors of ethnic violence, there may be several lessons for preventing or moderating this kind of violence.

1. Supporting rebellions against authoritarian rule in countries with ethnic or tribal divisions may be dangerous. The violence following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya was arguably worse than the violence perpetrated by these dictators. Ethnic violence is particularly likely when ethnic divisions are reinforced with a history of intergroup violence and status reversal.

2. Fast recognition of new ethnic states in the breakup of a federal state may be dangerous. Germany and the European Union recognized Croatia and Slovenia as states in 1991 and 1992. These were easy cases because of the relative homogeneity of the two populations, but the model of ethnic politics thus recognized by Western powers may have contributed to ethnic violence in Kosovo.

3. Once ethnic violence has begun, outside intervention in the form of material promises and threats are unlikely to produce peace. As described by Petersen (2011), Western carrots and sticks—even promise of EU membership—did little to control ethnic conflict in Kosovo; military force was and is necessary to keep the peace.

How might health professionals seek to counter the flow of people into becoming susceptible to violence and then becoming violent? First, address injustice and discrimination as a health challenge, using the influence of health professions to advocate for justice and civil rights. Second, in instances when a tectonic change has occurred in inter-ethnic relations, seek to safeguard the security of the group or groups who have lost status.

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