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# Building a theory of communication and ethno-political conflict

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## ABSTRACT

Coherent development of theories of ethno-political conflict has been slow and scattered. Moreover, the role of communication has been seriously neglected. I theorize ethno-political conflict along two dimensions: the level in which the conflict is entered (macro state-level, mid civil society level, and individual level) and the type of communication most characteristic of the level (bargaining and negotiation, intergroup relations and intercultural communication, identity theories and deliberative processes). Additionally, the article makes the case for a social constructionist perspective on ethnicity, and develops a relationship between communication and ethno-political conflict. Finally, theories of communication are posed as mediators of social systems that couple the communication systems of two conflictive groups in order for them to increase commensurability.

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The impetus for this article is derived from three concerns: The first is to establish the components of a theory of ethno-political conflicts. The second is to develop the relationship between communication and ethno-political conflicts. The third is to predict and ameliorate ethno-political conflicts and violence. I model ethno-political conflict along two dimensions: the level in which the conflict is entered (macro state-level, mid civil society level, and individual level) and the type of communication most characteristic of the level (bargaining and negotiation, intergroup relations and intercultural communication, identity theories and deliberative processes). What follows is a model of ethno-political conflict because a justified set of abstract principles (theory) capable of explaining ethno-political conflict has yet to be developed. Still, models are particularly valuable in theory development because they propose sets of relationships and components that can be tested. Moreover, the distinction between models and theories is not always very clear and models can stand as theoretical beacons for years, continuing to guide and direct research.

## Ethnicity as discursive construction

The concept of ethnicity has become anemic in recent years and in need of conceptual and definitional clarity. There is a tendency to think of ethnic groups as sharply differentiated

units with clear boundaries. While there is nothing particularly “wrong” about this, there is a tendency to essentialize the group and ignore vernaculars (Brubaker, 2002). A constructionist perspective recognizes that two groups – for example, Israelis and Palestinians – have different political histories that define the boundaries between them. What does matter is the construction of identity, and we will see below that the empirical and theoretical work in ethnopolitical conflict leads to the issue of identity, and its persistent role in these conflicts. The following definition of ethnicity is proposed as grounded in discursive activity.

Ethnicity is the social construction of an origin story as the basis for a collectivity. The origin story includes claims of territorial rights, physiognomy, and culture. Ethnic groups are “imagined” communities (Anderson, 1991) because they assume a commonality but all members do not interact in the concrete manner of a material community. They are in deep comradeship with vast numbers of people with whom they have no direct contact. Ethnicity is descent-based with membership requirements based on the symbolic practices of defining boundaries, territory, language, and culture. Yet ethnicity can also be based on commonality of experience because it constructs a unity out of differences. Where race assumes the other is fixed and self-evident, ethnicity positions people in historical and cultural context. Ethnicity is a set of socially attributed characteristics that have identitive value.

Ethnic conflict deploys two additional theoretical considerations. One is that decision-makers still use instrumental motivation for involvement in ethnopolitical conflict; that is, they employ military considerations, internal politics, economics, and international political issues when making decisions. Instrumental assumptions presume that groups seek competitive advantages attached to an ethnic identity. Additionally, the identitive dimension of conflict is dependent on situational constraints and the strategic use of identity. Ethnic identity is activated in different situations in order to achieve specific goals. Identity is distinctly political for ethnopolitical conflict with less emphasis on cultural content. Consequently, ethnic identity is activated within various political situations in order to achieve specific goals.

The theoretical model presented here relies on identity salience as the primary predictor of when ethnicity is foregrounded. Ethnic groups produce constructed identities and political identities in particular. Two or more ethnopolitical groups might be in conflict over common material resources such as land, water, or economics but when the spark of ethnic identity is added to the mixture the result can be a combustible concoction capable of significant violence. Clearly, the most vicious violence derives from individual and group identity. Organizing humans into groups is quite simple. People will bind themselves together and develop an identity, however fragile, around almost anything: age, television shows (e.g., “Trekees”), sexual orientation, sports teams, skin color, shared history, metaphysical beliefs, gender, common descent, and even simple proximity. Tajfel (1978) showed how easily group identity could be established even in artificial laboratory conditions. Groups have power in societies and the more intense the group identity, the more power they have.

Ethnic groups are understood as a collective composed of perceptions. The definition of ethnic groups is humanly devised in order to create order to maximize understanding. Ethnic groups are institution-like in that they are composed of structures and informal rules, customs, traditions, expectations, procedures, and myths. Ethnic groups do not exist independently of communication systems that structure meaning and are perpetually

contested. Ethnic groups, as they are discursively constructed, fit into a larger pattern of meaning; that is, they are understood as communicative and a site of identity formation. In short, ethnic groups include those “in” the group and “out” of the group, each of which is constructed by discursive activities that are continually reshaped during reflection. Ethnic groups are the arena where culture and identity are reproduced and contested. Culture includes shared beliefs, values, and practices that are passed on to other groups and generations. Anyone can participate in such a cultural experience. But ethnic group culture is distinguished by two things: common physiological characteristics, and a belief that one’s group shares a common descent (Ross, 2000; Suny, 2001).

Ethnic identity is the result of taking personal experiences and extending them to group experiences. This is how the process of comradeship begins with unknown others. We translate private experiences into the principles of politics. So, one’s upbringing and family are assumed to signify a larger abstract collective. Or if I, and a few people like me, have a particular historical experience then that experience becomes relevant to all others who share something with me. For example, the Israeli-Jewish identity can be primarily one of four identities each of which is differentially influenced by historical structural effects. One can be “Jewish” in the *religious* sense of the term and have his or her identity organized around Bible, synagogue, prayer, etc. Or, to be a Jew can mean to be a member of an ethnic group on the basis of *physiology* (Eastern European or Mizrahi). To be “Jewish” can also contain a secular identity incorporated into the *national Israeli identity*. One can be an “Israeli” without being religiously or physiologically Jewish. Finally, there is the *cultural identity*, which is an amalgamation of each where an adherent identifies with multiple aspects of the general term “Jewish.” A macro perspective on the creation of a Jewish identity would depend on historical forces such as the formation of Zionism and its influence on the development of the Israeli national identity associated with the State of Israel, the history of religious persecution, dominant biblical and religious themes, or exposure to modernization that determines social mobility.

## Theory and ethnopolitical conflict

The most difficult conflicts are the ones based on groups that are very large and able to facilitate the maintenance of group borders. One of the most challenging and potentially violent sets of boundaries in a society is ethnicity. When ethnicity is a group marker it becomes easier to police the borders because recognition of who is “in” the group and who is “out” is relatively easy and inexpensive. When groups form along ethnic lines, the opportunity for conflict increases in both frequency and intensity. The result is ethnic conflict (Ellis, 2009) in the form of intergroup conflict (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). This line of research is termed *ethnopolitical* conflict rather than just ethnic conflict for two reasons. First, political ideology and problems are one more way groups organize themselves around incentives in order to gain access to resources. Second, all ethnic conflicts are political in nature. The Israelis and Palestinians, for example, or the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland are not in direct conflict over ethnicity, but ethnicity is implicated in a more complex process of ethnic identification and political conflict. When ethnic identity becomes *racialized* or *ethnicized* it becomes political. The fact that we are invited to identify with an ethnic group means that the process of identification is subject to the political constraints of any power relationship. This process of

ethnicizing our group identity is a powerful political tool used to justify extreme violence. Resisting the politicization of identity is one conflict resolution practice.

The two theoretical constructs most related to the activation of ethnic identity and responsible for negative dispositions toward an ethnic outgroup are threat and recognition. Maoz and McCauley (2008) repeatedly demonstrate that the perception of *threat* from an outgroup increases the tendency to be politically more intolerant and display lower levels of willingness to take the other side's issues into consideration. *Recognition* is a component of identity that refers to honoring the status of the "other" (Nagar & Maoz, 2015). To have your group recognized is to acknowledge its unique identity and accept it as deserving of respect and to be taken seriously. Failure to recognize another group results in deformation of the group identity and is a form of symbolic oppression. Ethnic conflicts, in particular, are identity-based whose resolution is more reliant on ethnic group recognition and the elimination of threat than other resource-based conflicts. Demands for recognition have increased in the modern era due to the new discourse of identity, which is particularly characteristic of asymmetric ethnic conflicts. Recognition is assumed to fulfill a human need and is highly implicated in intractable conflicts where historical grievances and injustices must be reconciled.

Below a model of communication and ethno-political conflict is explicated in which it is the communication process that regulates the construction of differences between groups that result in path-dependent endpoints with respect to the intensity and nature of the conflict. In addition to considering such variables as ethnic distance and other conditions of exploitation and discrimination, the theory assumes that ethnic identity and conflict are the result of a series of discourses that direct individuals' attention to particular socially constructed versions of ethnicity and conflict. The analysis herein proceeds logically from the socially constructed nature of ethnicity, which means that it can be deconstructed and redefined through the discourse process, through essential theoretical components and leading up to the efficacy of human interaction (communicative contact) and resolution possibilities. Moreover, communication theories are contextual and each metacommunicative context must be accounted for by a form of communication most conducive to the particular context.

The discussion of components of ethno-political conflicts identifies various processes and relational consequences. Table 1 is an adaptation of a table by Ropers (2004), which accounts for the type of communication necessary for the particular ethno-political context. The componential processes apply to all three contextual ideal types in Table 1. A mediator can insert himself or herself into the process, without favoritism to either side and translate utterances or symbolic products into a more shared social reality (Baker, 2006). That is, a third-party can participate in the construction of new reality that is more amenable to management. A third-party mediator can reconstruct cultural meanings and create new narratives.

The *macro level political* approach seeks to stabilize the political order in an environment of violent conflict. The solutions within this framework are thought to be a balance of interests between competing groups. Communication occurs at the level of advisors, leaders, and diplomats. This is the level at which political scientists and international relations experts enter the dispute. Bargaining, negotiation, and diplomatic processes (Gilboa, 2000) are typical types of communication when working with problems on the macro level of political order. Kelman's (2009) groups are a good example of

**Table 1** Levels of analysis and types of communication.

Level	Idea of conflict	Approach	Outcomes	Communication
Macro level: Political conflict	Problem of political order; structural problem of national unit	Diplomacy and power moves	Political settlements	Bargaining and negotiation; media symbolism; promoting understanding
Conflict management	Natural homeostatic state of conflict that leads to change but must be kept in control	Civil society development; education; contact between groups	Improved relationships and communication; respect for group identity	Problem-solving groups; civil society coordination; communicative relationships; legal channels; forms of conflict resolution
Transformational conflict	Conflict as a means for justice and problem resolution	Inclusive of minority groups; intergroup contact	Power-sharing; grassroots change in dialogue; leveling of differences; respect for different identity groups	Communication competency skills; dialogue; intercultural contact; deliberative communication

contact communicatively based experiences designed to serve the policy process to produce changes in individuals and policy. The *conflict management* level (e.g., civil society, schools, trade unions, neighborhood organizations) deals with conflicts over issues of substance but also with the relationships between the various parties and institutions on the civil society level. The goal of communication is not necessarily to win arguments and maximize outcomes as much as it is problem-solving and forming new coordinative communication relationships. The parties begin with a joint recognition of shared problems and work to resolve these problems together. Work by Varshney (2002), mediating tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India, demonstrates the importance of civil society and of rationalizing contact between groups. The *conflict transformation* level focuses on individuals and is devoted to settling differences and conflict resolution, but particularly expresses the importance of individual change. The type of communication most associated with dialogue and deliberation is characteristic of this level of conflict, including power-sharing and intercultural sensitivities designed to respect differences and identity groups. Intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011) is used to create change by strengthening disadvantaged groups and establishing a dispute settlement political culture. A transformational approach to conflict is necessary for identity-based conflicts.

To say that ethnicity is socially constructed is to say that it is a social category – Zionist, Catholic, conservative, Russian, lesbian, liberal, etc. – and that this social category is accepted by an individual as relatively enduring and descriptive of consequential qualities of the individual. Hence, social actors can organize themselves along common characteristics and formulate an intense sense of who is “in” and who is “out.” The cognitive capacity to identify those who are “like us” and those who are “not like us” was established early in human development (Gil-White, 2001) and has become often an almost automated response. Moreover, social construction implies that the nature, rules, and characteristics of the category are the result of human interaction that can change over time. Social constructionism stands in stark contrast to a primordial perspective, which holds that social categories are natural and inevitable. To the extent to which categories can be redefined and changed is central to the formulating assumptions of social

constructionism, as its primary research task is to undermine primordialism by demonstrating how essentialist assumptions are non-descriptive of even the most taken-for-granted categories like gender and ethnicity. A constructivist perspective is by definition discursive since it holds that identities are constructed under historical-political circumstances and these circumstances are constituted through a variety of discourses (Gergen, 1999).

Human social construction processes are interactive because they are the result of jointly constructing understanding. Joint construction means that one person's understanding shapes another person's and meaning is not developed separately within a person (Shome & Hegde, 2002). Instead, a person develops meaning by using experiences and interactions with others. Ethnicity is a social process in which contested meanings serve as connections between other markers of ethnicity (e.g., physiological markers). Ethnicity is not an essence but an ongoing self-reflexive process subject to macro and micro forces of continuous political and social struggle (Ellis, 2006). Ethnicity, then, is a social group defined and constructed by the communication process. Ethnic groups are not a genetic branch of humankind (Suny, 2001). They are collectives based on the perception of common physiology and experiences that result from shared descent-based history. Individual and group identities that result from the origin story are most reliant on identity salience and activation for determining the ethnic nature of the conflict. Consequently, the difference between conflict and ethnic conflict is that ethnic conflict is identity-based. Traditional "rational" conflict seeks to resolve substantive issues but ethnic conflicts have the reestablishment of identity as their primary goal. This is what is meant by ethnicity being "implicated" in ethnopolitical conflicts even though the conflict is not "about" ethnicity.

Constructionism relies on the purposeful acts of naming, categorizing, and mapping symbolic distinctions that result in socially constructed definitions of individuals and ethnic groups. Ethnicity is fundamentally communicatively constructed and not a unitary concept that derives from a common culture only. Rather, it is organized around a set of signifiers (that have meaning value) for a community of people. These ethnic group boundaries can be physiological markers (pigmentation), geographic location (Asian), and signifiers of inclusion (e.g., cuisine, dress, accents). Although ethnic groups can have considerable heterogeneity, their group identity is held together by a belief in the kinship members feel by their participation in the imaginary culture (Anderson, 1991). Ethnic groups can be re-designated from one category to another. Religious Jews, for example, can be constructed as primarily religious, ethnic, or national (Craig, 1999).

## **Discourse and identity construction**

The self in identity theory is reflexive and thus can consider itself an object to be named, categorized, and classified. The standard definition of identity as "the psychological attachment to an ethnic group or heritage" (Cheung, 1993, p. 1216) is foundational. But the definition must be extended to include ethnic identity not as fixed categorization, but rather as a fluid and dynamic understanding of self and ethnic background (Phinney, 2003). A discursive approach to identity construction locates the key agency in symbolic and cultural systems that have their own effects and logic. For example, the contemporary



discourse of ethnicity might include colonialism and its attendant messages. Groups such as Hutus and Tutsis, Continental Indians, or Palestinians have spent a generation or more constructing concepts of the self by refracting messages from colonial powers back onto themselves. Moreover, these supra-messages about power, agency, identity, and control make for a line connecting colonialism to contemporary ethnic violence.

Contemporary theories of identity have drifted away from universals based on Western values of independence and individualism, and become more fluid and flexible recognizing porous boundaries and multiculturalism (Schachter, 2005). Political conflict groups compete directly for the dominant and most legitimate identity. Moreover, political conflict and identity are significantly intertwined such that the development of one group identity invalidates the other (Kelman, 1999). That is, this negative interdependence means that the two identities compete directly for political, narrative, and historical acceptance and the success of one disqualifies the other. This is descriptive of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict where both groups narrate a similar history that is ideologically polarized. In the case of intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2013) this identity conflict continues from one generation to the next passed on by the discursive apparatus available to groups.

The idea of the “Muslim world” as a self-contained culture is an example of one of the communicative distortions that results when scholars and lay people alike fail to recognize how ethnic groups appropriate, reproduce, and transform everyday communicative processes that represent enacted identities (Emon & Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2017). That there exists some single foreign community of Muslims is a longstanding construct. If the notion of a “Muslim world” is not dictated by theology or political Islam then what explains this erasure of ethnic particularity in Islam? Emon and Steinmetz-Jenkins (2017) describe how this ethnic group image is actually the racialization of “Muslimness” in interaction with Muslim resistance to this identity. Conflict identities develop within a particular social-psychological milieu that leads to one of the most distinctive characteristics of conflict identities, which is the exclusion of the recognition of the legitimacy of a competing group (Shome & Hegde, 2002). Conflict identities that are not activated and salient – of which the most typical goal of conflict resolution is to deactivate and make conflict identities less salient – are benign and inconsequential.

The discursive system assumes that the logic of discourse and symbol systems can be understood and used to make predictions and posit explanations. Geertz (1973), in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, demonstrates how the organization of cock fights was a metaphorical extension of the organization of Balinese society. As part of the discursive system, they are a symbolic expression of subsurface identities and emotions that help explain the nature of Balinese society. The Israelis and Palestinians have constructed a complementary discursive logic such that their identity narratives are fundamentally different but interlocking. The Israelis maintain the dominant identity and the Palestinians a subservient one characterized by victimization. Their polarizing historical discourse, for example, includes language where the Israelis refer to their “War of Independence” but the Palestinians refer to the “Catastrophe.” Israelis are proud “Zionists” rebuilding the Jewish people, but the Palestinians equate Zionism with colonialism, racism, and occupation. “Loss” and “dispossession” pervades the Palestinian master identity (Said, 1994) compared to the Israeli identity of “return to the homeland” and success at “making the desert bloom.” Each identity has strong emotional tropes available to it: The Palestinians deploy images of powerlessness and humiliation while Israelis use existential threats to



justify the necessity of their strength. Ethnic identity is negotiated through discourse via the natural back-and-forth in the context of seeking political gain. In the case of the Israelis and Palestinians their cultural logic catapults them toward polarization, differentiation, separation, and negative identity (Ellis, 2016). The identity issues are particularly intense and problematic because of their deep psychological and political nature. They are, by definition, the opposite of each other and can only be resolved through deconstruction of this opposition and construction of new identities.

The key issue that indicates a functional relationship between an individual and a group identity (e.g., an ethnic group) is salience and the activation of the relationship (Stets & Burke, 2000). When an identity relationship is salient the probability of influence is increased. So, for example, if my ethnic group is insulted or threatened then my membership in that group is activated and becomes salient such that I will behave in a manner consistent with membership in that group. That is, I am most likely to be defensive of the group and identify with it. The probability of activation is dependent on a variety of conditions, both psychological and contextual, such as a person's membership in the social structure, their commitment to the group, the number of persons to whom one is tied, positive or negative consequences of the activation, and the strength or depth of ties to others. Ethnic conflict is typically caused by redefining some behavior as salient and therefore ready for activation. These issues form the core of theory and ethnopolitical conflict and are further conceptualized below.

### **The causes of ethnic violence**

Two concepts that enjoy a special consensus with respect to the causes of ethnopolitical conflicts are the importance of *ethnic salience* and the role of *construction from social discourses* that influence how individuals identify with groups. There are three most characteristic explanations for ethnic violence (Bakkan, Jakobsen, & Jakobsen, 2016). The *grievance explanation* (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004) recognizes the role of group-shared grievances where some aspect that serves as a common basis for group identity is being challenged. Conflict results, from a group grievance perspective, when some disaffection is held in common. The *opportunity explanation* views ethnic groups as powerful interest groups where its members have common interests (Toft, 2002). Ethnic groups are viewed as power coalitions where groups compete for their interests. The groups are seen as rational actors using their power to acquire resources and benefits. A third theory of ethnic conflict, and the one modeled here, accepts the common view of *ethnic identity* as enough to make a group grievance salient. Identity is powerful enough to communicate boundaries and be associated with visible characteristics such as language, meaning, religion, and cultural practices. Bakkan et al.'s (2016) data clearly support the strength of identity as the predominant issue in ethnic conflict. Group distinctiveness is grounded in ethnic identification and highly related to the willingness to engage in violence (Brewer, 1993). The sense that one's own group is distinct satisfies the need for exclusivity in the sense of belonging to a greater collective. Groups with a strong sense of distinction homogenize outgroups and see their own group as varied and differentiated. The homogenization of the outgroup depersonalizes the outgroup and makes violence easier. Again, from a communication standpoint, ethnic violence is caused by highly

activated and salient group identity and meaning distortions that result from biased interactions.

The pressures toward ethnic “distance” and “distinctiveness” are great as each group employs tropes and metaphors related to differences, religion, history, etc. all in the service of group distinction and identification. “Ethnic distance” is a strong predictor of violence grounded in ethnic identification. For example, the labels “Tutsi” and “Hutu” in Rwanda were originally class distinctions with a fair amount of movement between groups based on porous borders and few differences in body type, skin color, or language. The distinction between the two groups was a colonial construction that was more responsible for creating the Hutu and Tutsi identity as a result of the political conflict rather than causing the conflict. Ethnic distance is theoretically related to incommensurability defined as “irreconcilable differences” because two or more paradigms involve different sets of problems, definitions, and standards (Chang, 1997; Ellis, 2006). It is possible to “interpret” the two incommensurable paradigms in a language other than the paradigm, which is what conflict resolution specialists do, but this will always be limited. This is the logical trap that Israelis and Palestinians are caught in. They are trying to reconcile in a simple logical manner what are incommensurate values. Ethnic distance is related to incommensurability as a measure of group differences.

Recognition is a serious dimension of ethnic group identity and certainly central to conflict resolution (Kampf, 2012). To be recognized means to be seen and acknowledged; it means to be an “other” with your own identity and a right to have symbolic cultural status. Intractable ethnopolitical conflicts have escalated and are understood as requiring “identity-based” approaches, which are struggles over intangible symbolic issues. Stories, narratives, and emotions and their role in creating subjective reality are the necessary analytical units for achieving reconciliation, sympathy, support, and recognition (Nagar & Maoz, 2015).

### **Components of a model of conflict between ethnopolitically divided groups**

Barth (1969), Fearon and Laitin (2000), Ellis (2006), Hammack (2006), Bakkan et al. (2016), and Caselli and Coleman (2013) have all maintained that ethnicity is less a matter of similarities among group members than differences – identity differences in particular. (cf. Giles, Reid, & Harwood, 2010). *Ethnic distance* is the theoretical nature and size of the variances between ethnic groups. For example, one would expect oppositional differences in skin color (black–white), linguistic distinctiveness, important religious differences, or physical characteristics to express maximal differences. Some groups mark themselves (e.g., circumcision, scarring, tattoos) in order to maximize distinctiveness and make it more difficult to identify with the group. When two groups are running their identities at maximum salience their ethnic distance is high because even if they share other ethnic similarities related to customs and rituals, identity salience is the condition when everything distinctive about one’s own group is foregrounded and galvanized. This is the reason that black–white relations in the United States and in South Africa, and the physiological markers used to distinguish Hutus and Tutsis, were so easily appropriated for genocide. They are rank ethnic markers based on group enforcing interpretations.

The concept of “ethnic distance” also refers to the causes and consequences of maximizing distance or differences between groups and the implications of those differences for conflict relations (see Caselli & Coleman, 2013). The more distance between groups, the more likely each group will misunderstand the other, maintain stereotypes, and construct an apparent set of justifications for escalating conflict. The relationship between ethnic distance and violence is correlational but not necessary or sufficient to cause violence. For example, the ethnic distance between Israelis and Palestinians can be composed as a measure of linguistic, political, physiological, and religious differences characterized by exploitation. Each group has evolved an identity as a “Palestinian” or “Israeli” and, as is typical of intractable asymmetrical conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2013), their identity is negative (Kelman, 1999) meaning that each affirmative group identity contains the negation of the other. This is a particularly antagonistic and distance-producing relationship and, of course, a conflict known to be one of the most recalcitrant. The analysis below clarifies these key relationships. They are not propositions in the formal sense, although any of the relationships can be tested, but designed to narrate the components of ethnopolitical conflict. When ethnic distance – as measured by economic, cultural, geographic, linguistic, physiological, and historical differences – is significant enough, and when contact between conflicting groups is minimal, then potential options for ameliorating differences and resolving problems are narrowed, making violence a greater possibility.

The minimum assumption for a model of ethnopolitical conflict begins with individuals being assigned to one of two groups A or B (Caselli & Coleman, 2013). Individuals are the same within each group and bring with them individual talents, abilities, and resources. In addition to individual resources there is a society endowment, which is the collection of in common resources that must be distributed amongst the populations and are influential with respect to conflict or peace behavior decisions. There is also a potential loss of units for both individuals and collective endowments. The loss for collective endowments could be for land, water rights, access to credit, or anything of public value. The stronger of the two groups is in a position to exploit the weaker with its greater human capital (e.g., Whites in the US or South Africa, Israelis). I will assume for purposes of illustration that A is the stronger group and typically enjoys numerical majority. But in the case of asymmetrical conflicts, where one group is clearly weaker with respect to individual resources and control of the common endowment, this weaker group (e.g., Palestinians) can still mobilize resources to combat the stronger group (use of terrorism, for example, or cultivating international condemnation directed toward the dominant group). The cost of responding to a conflict act with a conflict response is a function of identity salience including its intensity and level of threat.

Depending on ethnic distance as well as cultural and political variables Group A has two actions available to it: Group A can behave toward group B in a conflict threatening manner (C) or a peaceful manner (P). This begins a sequence in which group B must decide on a C response or a P response and consider the cost of each. Group B can acquiesce to the aggressive act and suffer loss of identity but save resources, or it can escalate the consequences and depart from the initial state of balance by challenging group A. In general, group A is more likely to attack or exploit group B if: (1) There is considerable ethnic distance between A and B such that they share very little cultural contact or commonality; (2) group B has a reasonable number of resources to be acquired. That is, B’s resources are not so few as to make conflict engagement not worth it, or so large

as to render them too strong; (3) the cost of responding with C is modest, or justifiable in relation to benefits; and (4) group identity is salient. Centola, Gonzalez-Avella, & Equilez, and San Miguel (2007) have demonstrated how homophilous clusters (e.g., ethnic groups) form through the social evolutionary process and become part of a well-integrated social structure that corresponds to distinct trait groups. The identity component of the model is most predictive with respect to ethnicity and ethnic distance. It is the primary component that accounts for variability, as the other measures of individual and common resources, group size, and rates of change are descriptive of any type of group. The identity component is the measure of ethnic identity salience that can be driven by threats, historical injustices, cultural tokens (e.g., Memorial holidays), or identity entrepreneurs (Matthiesen, 2013). Groups characterized by ethnic distinctions have a more salient identity. That is, greater ethnic distance and higher costs due to contrasts between groups based on identity salience that exaggerates differences either imagined or real.

This means that A loses some individual assets given the expenditure of effort as well as loss of units of the commons. How a group experiences conflict will depend on the configuration of the six components of the model. These are (1) individual resources for both groups A and B, shared common resources, group size, identity salience, and rates of change for these variables (Caselli & Coleman, 2013). Some conflict scenarios with respect to the likelihood of A being aggressive towards B are quite apparent. For example, more aggressive behavior toward another group is likely if the cost of responding from that other group is high. High costs are associated with responding on the basis of identity salience. That is, if ethnic identity is particularly ostensible, and it is more easily threatened, then identity is subject to arousal and activation and capable of being threatened or challenged, thereby increasing the cost of responding in a conflict manner.

Not surprisingly, C's behavior on the part of group A or group B is heightened when the costs are relatively low but the available commons are high. When individual resources are high and members of the group are just richer, identities and their salience relax and participants exhibit P behavior. But behaviors do not always mean the same thing. So, there are those instances where a group is rich in both individual and community resources thereby encouraging C behavior because of superior resources and the assumption that conflict can be held within cost limits, and a second context in which the group is rich in resources but avoids conflict because it is comfortable enough and has too much to lose.

The components capture those instances where being rich prompts exploitation because you have the resources to succeed, and so does being poor because you need resources. When groups get larger and become richer in resources they promote P interactions because they have more to lose and per capita gains are small. The effects of shared resources on ethnic relations are significant. When common resources are plentiful both A and B are interested in exploiting the other but often not willing because the costs are high. Consequently, A can engage in C behavior without the other side fighting back. There is a risk that A will miscalculate B's willingness to fight back, and if B tenders a C interaction and CC is the form of contact that characterizes the relationship between A and B then this can bring about new tensions and attempts to confront the other group thereby raising costs.

Finally, an asymmetric conflict is modeled based not on who has the most to gain but on the maximum gain between two groups (Caselli & Coleman, 2013). Whenever a minority group (Palestinians) exploits and gains resources they are achieving maximum gain

between the two groups. If group B is a minority group and smaller they will be associated with gaining advantages on the dominant group (Israelis). This is consistent with the typical pattern in international relations of smaller and weaker groups seeming to have certain successes at the expense of dominant groups. Sometimes a strong majority will simply avoid contact and let B enjoy some success because the dominant group can afford it. The theory is robust with respect to propositions, enriched research questions, and a better understanding of ethnopolitical conflict. The work on measurement and concept refinement is ongoing (cf. Cederman & Girardin, 2007; Fearon & Laitin, 2000, 2003).

## Empirical illustrations

The empirics of ethnopolitical conflict are multifaceted. For instance, spatial distance is an important aspect of ethnic conflict as well as symbolic differences. Groups that are separate from one another share little information and knowledge of the other and a salient identity threat can easily motivate conflict. But in other cases it is proximity, and all of the attendant competition for shared resources, that makes for conflict. In this case, group size and resources will predict conflict. The Israelis and Palestinians are geographically close with substantial information about the other and fierce competition over a limited common resource (the land). Yet we would expect the diminution of the intensity of the conflict over time as the discursive system influences the relationship between the group's interdependent knowledge of one another and the perception of the land's value. Earlier in the conflict the value of the central common resource (the land) was particularly high but it varied as a share of the total income as the groups interacted more and altered their relationship with one another along with the value of the resource. The parties to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have always had a highly salient identity and competition for a valuable common resource. These are ideal conditions for exploitation, especially in the case of the dominant group with advantages in individual resources and additional sources of income. This, of course, is a situation descriptive of the Israelis.

Over time, the Palestinians became increasingly aggressive and directed attention away from the sanctity of the land and began a campaign of international condemnation against Israel, including moral transgressions and Palestinian justification for violence as the only means of response to the superior Israeli military. This altered the value of common resources for Israel as the cost of the conflict became increasingly high. Israelis then expanded the discourse of peace and problem resolution along with changes in other state variables that resulted in additional peace processes (e.g., Camp David, Oslo) in both Track 1 and 2 diplomacy.

Sometimes ethnopolitical conflicts are termed "ethnoreligious" indicating that religion plays a significant role in what divides groups. But these ethnopolitical conflicts are not directly about religion; the two groups are not arguing about God or theological principles. Still, religion is implicated. Sometimes, as in the case of Jihadism, religion plays a more significant role. This complex relationship (religion and conflict) can be expressed in accordance with the theoretical principles outlined here. Different religious pairings will have different rates of identity intensity and higher values will have greater likelihood of conflict. The lower values of identity intensity will be associated with P behaviors (peaceful) and should temper conflict. Religion cannot be ignored since it is an aspect of ethnic conflict. It is a particularly powerful force of communal group identity that

contributes to shared perceptions. Gurr (1993) noted that religion is responsible for the salience of ethnic identity. Religion provides a sense of connection to something greater than oneself, and thus infuses the group's identity with significance (Fox, 1997, 1999).

Religion is a signifier of a natural community of people. It becomes significant and salient with respect to ethnic conflict when (a) there are attributions of differences between one group and the "other;" (b) some political issue actively specifies the needs of a group; (c) the boundaries of the people are recognized along with mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Consequently, because the key factor for any ethnic group content is its salience, it is possible for religious differences not to be a significant factor in ethno-political conflict because they are not salient. For example, McGarry and O'Leary (1995) in the case of Northern Ireland demonstrated convincingly that religious differences did not predict communal violence very well. Among a variety of issues, they showed that there is sometimes, more violence in secular communities, violence expanded during periods of church cooperation, participants in the conflict attributed causes to political issues not religious ones, and the parties and paramilitaries refer to themselves in secular language.

### **Communication and the instrumental management of ethno-political conflict**

All conflicts have management or resolution as a primary practical goal, and theories are obligated to include these issues. The theory of ethno-political groups presented here is concerned with deeply incompatible groups that use core values to make exclusivist claims on truth. This results in the problem of incommensurability (Ellis, 2016) and whether divided groups can be reconciled. A counter-productive cycle develops such that intergroup conflict and competition produces distorted information, and then decisions are made on the basis of distorted information. Improving interaction between conflicting groups enhances participation, improves relationships with institutions, and contributes to inclusion. Managing conflict is a matter of finding language that can serve as a commensurable alternative capable of mediating differences and thereby managing the conflict. Conflict managers facilitate communication, which increases commensurability and improves mutual understanding.

Communication is central to understanding and working with these intractable conflicts. It is elemental to the conflict. Micro level interactions structure behavior and actors in intractable conflicts to think about the communication process. They strategize, discuss, and manipulate symbols, all in an effort to control others and define themselves. The significant meanings of these conflicts do not reside in individuals but are accomplishments of the participants driven by social and political circumstances. It is the communication process that reaches across cultural divides and provides the mechanisms by which conflicts are processed. Such conflicts require deeper communicative engagement designed to widen the circle of identity and inclusion.

### **Theoretical relationship between communication and levels of analysis**

Each of the levels in Table 1 suggest some different communication theories with different goals, but all are concerned with moving intractable conflicts toward settlement. The issues



are theory in the context of the approaches and the implication of the theory for how the theory impacts the larger conflict, the nature of the successful intervention, hypotheses about how the theory works, and effects on individuals. Communication theories pertaining to identity and deliberation are relevant to ethnopolitical conflicts.

### **Macro level – bargaining, and negotiation**

The type of communication most associated with the macro diplomatic level of communication is *bargaining*, *negotiation* and diplomacy. Its emphasis is on each party recognizing its interest and working to achieve mutual gains makes it most appropriate for large-scale political conflicts (Gilboa, 2000). There are numerous strategies and tactics to negotiation (including negotiating on broad principles, capturing the moral high ground, opening and late game moves, nonverbal communication, and public diplomacy) but four principles comprise the underlying core of negotiation and are always operating: negotiate about problems, not people; focus on interests, not positions; be prepared with numerous options; measure gains and losses with some acceptable objective standard (Fisher & Urey, 1981). The assumption is that the parties will be successful if they have mutually beneficial outcomes. The structure of bargaining and negotiation communication is both limiting and enabling. It includes formal structures (e.g., the law) and informal procedures. The actual practice of state-level conflict management is a rational outcome model practiced mostly by elites. Macro political entities are institutions infused with ideas and values that are in the background of the collective memories of the state and deploying the rational exchange model of bargaining and negotiation against the foregrounded communicative abilities of the other side. Managing a conflict at the state level produces discursive documents (e.g., treaties, agreements), which can be productive or oppressive, but are designed for strategic effects. Bargaining and negotiation at the macro level are burdened by the need for structural coupling (Baraldi, 2017) or for two communication systems to conjoin sufficiently such that each social system can produce change in the other. Such coupling, which is measured by the outcomes of bargaining and negotiation, make third-party interventions possible and assist with the translation process from one meaning system to another.

### **Conflict management**

This is the mid-level of divided societies where contact between groups and a proper arrangement of civil society are addressed. Varshney (2002) reported some of the most persuasive evidence of the importance of civil society by explaining how Hindu-Muslim ethnic conflict was considerably mediated by an engaged and integrated civil society. Putnam (1993) demonstrated how dense networks of civic engagement and associations were more likely to produce cooperative citizens and conflictual parties who were concerned with mutual benefits. The key quality of civil associations lies in their capacity to stimulate “norms of generalized reciprocity” and trust that are essential to cooperation. In particular, there are two communication theories associated with the civil society level of analysis – *intergroup relations* and *intercultural communication*.

The most basic communication theory of practice for conflict management is effective *intergroup* conflict resolution that implies important changes in how members of different



communities and groups interact with one another. Intergroup communication theory (Ellis, 2009; Giles, 2012; Giles et al., 2010; Maoz & Ellis, 2008; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011) is guided by the principle that cooperation and attendant dispositions such as understanding and respect can be developed between communities that work together under appropriate contact conditions. Intergroup conflict management has two important theoretical directions. The first is improvement in communication between communities. The early work of Gordon Allport (1954) and the contact hypothesis held that equal status contact between conflicting groups has positive effects in terms of attitudes and emotions toward the other group. From Allport to the extensive multi-year meta-analysis of Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), with studies utilizing cultural, political, and ethnic groups from around the world, results clearly indicate specific benefits of intergroup contact. Secondly, intergroup contact at the community level must design contact experiences that maximize opportunities for local level interaction.

The second communication theory most pertinent to the civil society level of analysis is *intercultural communication theory* (Ross, 2000). When cultural groups collide there is a plethora of cognitive distortions and misunderstanding that have yet to be codified. The tendency is to make misplaced attributions to explain our own negative acts as situationally required but the negative acts of the outgroup as characteristic of their nature. Models for avoiding the mobilizing of intergroup hatred would include the study of emotions related to reconciliation, conflict resolution, and the regulation of emotions in intractable conflicts (Halperin & Reifen-Tagar, 2017). Participants in ethnopolitical conflicts benefit from meta-intercultural communication. That is, the two parties benefit from their divergent understandings and translating between them to find more common language. Any place where there are intergroup antagonisms you will also find political actors mobilizing those antagonisms in the service of their own interests. Highlighting cultural differences and coordinating communication systems is an example of intercultural communication. For example, argument between Israelis and Palestinians about the historical importance of the land, the status of Jerusalem, or biblical injunctions foregrounds intercultural presuppositions. Intercultural communication is accomplished through the coupling of the communication systems.

One example of a source of mistrust and confusion is cultural differences in communication styles. For example, one line of work has explicated these differences for Israelis and Palestinians (Maoz & Ellis, 2008). These styles have been partially informed by Katriel's (1986) ethnographic work on *dugri* and *musayra*, which are communication codes for Israeli-Jews and Arabs, respectively. Their dynamics highlight how confusion, misunderstanding, erroneous interpretations characterize the relationship between these two groups. The Israeli-Jewish *dugri* code is characterized by talk that is "straight and to the point." *Musayra*, in sharp contrast, means to "accommodate" and "go along with." *Musayra* communication is indirect, polite, courteous, and nonconfrontational. Conflicting ethnopolitical cultures construct meaning through different interpretive frames such that the Israeli "discourse of security" is interpreted as "aggression" by Palestinians. The two cultures have evolved incompatible semantic frames (e.g., "war of independence" versus the "Nakba or disaster"; "Zionism" versus "apartheid"; "security" versus "aggression") that results in stunted and difficult intercultural interactions which are a significant barrier to effective communication and problem-solving.

### **Transformational conflict**

This level of analysis is an approach to conflict that recognizes the limitations of the state and political leaders when building genuine peace. A transformational approach emphasizes individual and interpersonal change rather than elite agreements. Altering attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and perceptions – as well as dealing with the fundamental identity issues characteristic of intractable ethnopolitical conflicts – is a matter of constructing new meanings and changing individuals. The transformational level of conflict analysis and practice makes it possible to develop restorative justice, forgiveness, cooperation, and reconciliation (Lederach, 1999; Scham, Salem, & Poggrund, 2005). Outside templates and models of problem solving and resolution can be helpful but do not replace local practices that develop resolutions within cultural context.

Two theories of communication are pertinent here. They are *identity theories* and *deliberative processes*. These two theories bound a continuum of individual subjectivity to group rationality. Intractable ethnopolitical conflicts are fundamentally identity conflicts; hence, they are about ethnic and national pride and influenced by mental representations of historical grievances and triumphs that are passed from one generation to another (Ramsbotham, 2010). The goal for identity conflicts is to find solutions that address basic threats to group identity in the sense of humiliation and victimization typically expressed in cultural conflicts. Identity conflicts are symbolic and communicative because they are dependent on the meaning systems that characterize groups. What makes identity conflicts so powerful is the tendency to essentialize them, or believe that descent-based members of a group share common inalienable essences.

Theories of communication and *identity* explain how people connect to the past and link across time and space. Members of ethnic groups sense a common fate and have common expectations about behavior, threats, and beliefs about their own dignity. The basic theoretical tenet of social identity is that membership in a group (national group, ethnic group, religious group) provides a definition of who you are including in your self-concept. Each of these memberships is represented by a mental scheme that includes attributes and information about how one should think and feel (Tajfel, 1978). Hence, when one particular group identity is salient a set of behaviors are expected. The accumulation of meanings into a story that describes a group's origins, history, and conflicts with others is a *narrative*. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians have a narrative and the "clash of narratives" defines the conflict.

*Deliberation*, in contrast to dialogue, focuses on the aggregation of information for the purpose of discussion and problem-solving. Traditional dialogue is more concerned with personal and other-transformation including a commitment to struggling with others whose worldviews are different. Informed by Buber (1958) and Gadamer (1982) dialogue seeks authenticity and a full appreciation of interpersonal relationships. The assumptions of dialogue – including multivocality, polysemy, uncertainty, constructivism, openness, and tolerance for differences and diversity – facilitate new relationships at the micro level that are conducive to conflict management. Deliberation, on the other hand, is more informed by Habermas (1989) who moved communication scholars toward political communication and into structured contexts that invited people to express divergent opinions and become part of the argumentative mix. The focus is more on dialogic decision-making including context and processes for solving substantive problems. It is

“problem-solving communication,” in the Schudson (1997) sense of the term, in that the concentration is on justificatory talk and practical relationships to resolve problems. Deliberation creates a space for public reasoning, analysis, and persuasion; it creates a communicative context that encourages participation, active listening, analysis, and argument all with a more practical problem-solving goal in mind.

## Conclusion

The theories discussed here are related to all the requirements of the conflict, including changing people’s lives and improving group capacity. Identity theory, deliberation, and intercultural communication all want to identify commonalities and recognize potentially effective options. This includes addressing vulnerabilities and threats linked to unresolved histories and using these contact experiences to explore possible futures. Intercultural communication further serves to sensitize each culture to problematic images, historical distortions, and cultural confusions. Each of the five theories develops practices for effects. For example, negotiation is useful for separating individuals from issues and focusing on interests rather than positions. These issues can then find themselves immersed in the deliberation process where separating issues from people is important. Conflict management theory such as intergroup communication builds community capacity and improves the possibilities for effective action. Transformational theories work on deeper aspects of recognition and reconciliation rooted to identities rather than problem-solving. Now that we have established the fundamental problem of managing different groups, and identified the three structural levels from which groups can be analyzed and managed, as well as identifying communication theories that direct our attention to solutions to ethnopolitical conflicts, we can attempt to structure the details of research possibilities in order to advance our understanding of communication and ethnopolitical conflicts.

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