Disaggregating Identities to Study Ethnic Conflict

John F. McCauley

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JOHN F. MCCAULEY

University of Maryland, USA

ABSTRACT   Research has shown that competition over resources, overlapping identity cleavages, and weak state institutions constitute important causal determinants of ethnic violence. Critical in identifying those factors have been research innovations that treat ethnic identities as political tools rather than primordial divisions. Thus, theoretical developments that consider ethnicity to be fluid and constructed, data sets that account for the actual political importance of group identities, and new methods that add geographic and psychological information to ethnic labels all constitute important breakthroughs. Yet, the study of ethnic conflict remains constrained by a tendency to treat as constant the political interests of actors in very different identity contexts.

1.   Introduction

Working in the Sahel and sub-Saharan regions of Africa, where both ethnolinguistic and religious rivalries are far too frequently associated with conflict, I have become most interested in the political exploitation of identity labels in the course of conflict. My broad research interest thus lies in understanding why conflicts emerge along one identity division or another, and why the same ethnic and religious groups may be at peace in one setting and at war in another. My theoretical approach to the study of ethnic conflict pins much of the responsibility on political elites, who have the ability to turn small disputes into large conflicts if doing so serves political ends. But I also recognize micro-level differences in the ways in which group members experience their different identity attachments. Guided by those theoretical interests, my methodological approach tends towards micro-level survey and experimental studies that allow for an evaluation of identity attachments in conflict.

2.   What Do We Know as a Field about the Causal Determinants of Ethnic Conflict?

In a market in northern Ghana in 1994, two men—one a Konkomba and the other a Namumba—found themselves in a dispute over the price of a guinea fowl, and the dispute turned violent, leaving the Namumba man dead. Soon, the Konkombas and the

Correspondence Address: John F. McCauley, Department of Government & Politics, University of Maryland, 3140 Tydings Hall, College Park, MD 20742, USA. Email: mccauley@umd.edu

Namumbas were engaged in widespread conflict, leading to the deaths of an estimated 1000 people. Scholars comfortably classify this conflagration as an example of ethnic conflict, but what makes it so, and at what point does the label appropriately apply? The example highlights the complexities and ambiguities regarding ethnic conflict, but it also serves to illustrate some of the key things we know about ethnic conflict's causal determinants.

First, we know that ethnic conflicts frequently have resource competition and inequalities at their core. In the context of the Guinea Fowl War in Ghana, the Namumbas and their allied ethnic groups were organized around traditional jurisdiction over lands, whereas the Konkombas were comprised largely of migratory farmers who claimed original indigeneity but who were subjected—as they saw it—to land use laws imposed by invaders. In that sense, the market dispute was only a catalyst for the groups to address a longstanding disagreement over formal access to land. More generally, we have learned to think of ethnic groups as similar to any other political actor, seeking to maximize interests in the context of scarce resources (see Collier & Hoeffler, 2004) or to address political and economic grievances (Cederman, Gleditch, & Buhaug, 2013). Thus, scholars have listed electoral incentives as an explanation for ethnic conflict in India (Wilkinson, 2004); diminishing arable lands and control of political power as reasons for ethnic conflict in Rwanda (Bigagaza, Abong, & Mukarubuga, 2002; Prunier, 1997); access to oil revenues as a source of ethnic conflict in Nigeria, Sudan, and elsewhere (Ross, 2012); and the redistribution of resources to poorer regions as a cause of ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia (Woodward, 1995).

Second, we know that overlapping cleavages tend to exacerbate ethnic conflict. When two or more types of identity—such as ethnicity, religion, or caste—follow the same patterns of division in society, the winners and losers remain fixed and fewer incentives for negotiation emerge. In short, more reasons exist for conflict and fewer exist to avoid it. Thus, the overlap of Muslim and Christian divisions with Hausa-Fulani and Igbo ethnic identities has aggravated ethnic conflict in Nigeria (Falola, 1998). Ethnic divisions between Flemings and Walloons in Belgium historically overlapped with a secular-religious divide, overcome only through consociational mechanisms (Lijphart, 1968). And during the Guinea Fowl War in Ghana, tensions increased when southern, Christian Ghanaians misconstrued the conflict and called for support from the Catholic Church in Rome. In keeping with the importance of differential access to resources, we also know that when ascriptive identity divisions overlap with socioeconomic inequalities or discrimination, the effects can be particularly insidious: not only do few incentives for cross-ethnic negotiation emerge, but winners and losers on political issues correspond to the haves and have-nots on economic ones (Stewart, 2008). In the region of sub-Saharan Africa where I work, populations are young and formal employment opportunities are often limited, further exacerbating tensions when socioeconomic status and ethnic identities overlap.

Third, we know that weak state institutions foster ethnic conflict, both by allowing rebel groups to seek redress with little fear of consequence and by failing to provide the order, rule of law, and means to prosperity that act as a bulwark against such conflict. Of course, we might disagree about how to measure the weakness of states—is it captured in low per capita GDP? In a small military? In the scarcity of paved roads?[1]—but we consistently see evidence of a relationship between these measures and the prevalence of conflict between groups described in ethnic terms (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Lake & Rothchild, 1996). To return to the example of the Guinea Fowl War, northern Ghana has

faced a poverty ratio as high as 7:1 compared to the south; it has also witnessed the only major ethnic conflict in Ghana since Independence and a series of minor ethnic disputes unobserved in the south (Alpine & Pickett, 1993). If variation in poverty rates can be taken as a measure of subnational variation in state institutional strength, this illustration too is consistent with our understanding of the relationship between state weakness and ethnic conflict.

3.   What Has Been the Most Useful Development Within This Literature Over Time and More Recently, and Why?

Scarification patterns, mythical origins, and the shapes of noses once differentiated ethnic groups in conflict (Delafosse, 1912; Gourevitch, 1998). The implication, of course, was that differences by nature begot animosities, and that groups in conflict would remain in conflict simply by virtue of those primordial differences. The field has come a long way since then.

Over time, the study of ethnic conflict has benefited most importantly from a movement away from perceptions of ethnic groups as fixed, primordially opposed actors and toward a consideration of the divisions that actually matter politically. That has meant two important developments. First, constructivist accounts of ethnicity have become increasingly commonplace, as scholars recognize that, for example, the stark divisions between Hutus and Tutsis were largely a function of Belgian Colonial efforts to ease the burden of administration in Rwanda (Gourevitch, 1998), or that Kalenjins in Kenya never even existed as an ethnic label prior to the 1950s (Lynch, 2011). Thus, rather than assigning as permanent the divisions that underpin ethnic conflict, scholarship has recognized the ebb and flow of ethnic group tensions and of ethnic groups themselves. This development has been particularly helpful in the context of African politics, where fluidity in identity labels has become a well-established norm.

Second, the movement towards a consideration of the divisions that actually matter has meant refined categorizations of the ethnic groups potentially in conflict during any period. An important breakthrough in the study of ethnic conflict was the introduction of ethnic fractionalization and polarization measures, which allowed for the systematic study of the ethnic context in which groups operate. Even more important has been the introduction of measures such as the Politically Relevant Ethnic Groups data (Posner, 2004) and the Ethnic Power Relations data set (Wimmer, Cederman, & Min, 2009), which aim to characterize groups not based on antiquated anthropological delineations but rather on the likelihood that those group labels are actually used in political contestation and conflict. The All Minorities At Risk (AMAR) data set allows groups to be defined according to multiple identity types (such as ethnolinguism and religion) concurrently, another important development towards capturing the divisions that shape ethnic conflict (Birnir et al., 2015). The Spatially Interpolated Data on Ethnicity couples self-reported ethnic identities with geographic coordinates, allowing for a refined measure of local ethnic diversity that can shift as populations move (von Schweinitz & Hunziker, 2016).

As important as this development has been over time, however, it has also raised a new challenge: how are scholars to both study ethnicity systematically and also to allow the constant change, fluidity, and flux that we now assign to those ethnic groups? Data sets like AMAR that provide multiple characterizations of identity groups help, as do the efforts led by Chandra (2012) to define ethnicity in 'combinatorial' fashion. To my

mind, research that relies on studied populations themselves to indicate the salient ethnic divisions and the bounds of those divisions is superior to research that assigns a limited set of rigid categories or group labels.

More recently, a key development in the study of ethnic conflict has been the incorporation of cross-disciplinary, mixed methods to the study of ethnic conflict. Measures of fractionalization, polarization, and dominance reveal some things. Adding Geographic Information Systems data on the precise geographic location of conflict outbreaks (see Cederman, Buhaug, & Rød, 2009); Implicit Association Test information on the psychological bias maintained by ethnic group members (McCauley, 2014a); common pool resource games from behavioural economics that elucidate degrees of favouritism (McCauley, 2014b); or historical data that highlight the political incentives that underpinned early divisions between groups offer a whole new set of information that complements large-n studies of ethnic conflict, to both theoretical and practical ends.

4.   What Has Been the Least Useful Development Within This Literature Over Time and More Recently, and Why?

Even as political scientists have made important headway in adding complexity to our conceptions of ethnic groups and the conflicts between them, the intellectual pressure to develop both parsimonious and widely generalizable models of intergroup interaction has spurred a less useful development in the study of ethnic conflict: the tendency to assign ethnic labels to conflicts that would better be described in other ways or according to other identity labels.

As the description of Ghana's Guinea Fowl War above makes clear, outside observers who study ethnic conflict often have only a limited understanding of the factors that turn peaceful disagreements or disputes into violent ones between groups. As a consequence, the tendency in the field has been to characterize conflicts as ethnic in nature based on the simple calculus that a majority of supporters on one side can be painted with one ethnic brush and a majority of supporters on the other side can be painted with a different ethnic brush. The source of angst between them, however, or the incentives that at least one side recognizes to engage in violent confrontation, may have nothing to do with the loose ethnic composition of the two groups. In fact, the rash application of ethnic labels to conflicts with only coincidental correlations to ethnic group divisions not only misrepresents the nature of conflicts, but it may also fuel those conflicts by imparting additional sources of division on opponents. In essence, the causal arrow can be reversed: ethnicity itself may have little to do with an outbreak of conflict, yet the conflict may then harden those ethnic divides.

An improvement in this regard has come from the literature on conflicts between religious groups, in which scholars draw a distinction between conflicts with opposing majorities and conflicts based on explicit substantive disagreements. Svensson (2007), for example, labels them religious identity vs. religious incompatibility conflicts; Toft (2007) describes them as religiously peripheral and religiously central conflicts. The task of applying such nuance to conflicts between ethnolinguistic groups is significantly more difficult, however, owing to the absence of the formal, written codes of behaviour that exist in the religious context.

That challenge highlights a perhaps more important shortcoming in the scholarship on ethnic conflict: not only is the ethnic label sometimes applied too quickly or simplistically,

but conflicts involving a range of identity types are generally conflated under one umbrella concept of ethnic conflict. Examples abound: Chandra (2004, p. 2) takes 'the term "ethnic group" to refer to the nominal members of an ascriptive category such as race, language, caste, tribe, or religion'. Rothchild (1997, p. 3) describes ethnic groups as 'formed along ethnic, racial, religious, regional, or class lines'. Posner (2005, p. 14) argues that 'linguistic, tribal, and religious communities . . . are all ethnic options'. The rationale for this black box approach to ethnic politics and ethnic conflict is straightforward: groups are assumed to have similar motivations under any identity context. We could easily imagine, however, that Hutus and Tutsis in early-1990s Rwanda had a systematically different set of priorities than did Muslims and Christians in the same context—even though those ethnic and religious categories describe the same community of people.

I have conducted research to explore this very shortcoming (see McCauley, 2014c). Using a priming experiment in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, I randomly exposed participants to either an ethnic or a religious context. The results were telling: individuals placed in the ethnic context were significantly more likely to prioritize club goods like local development, whereas otherwise identical individuals placed in the religious context were systematically more inclined to prioritize issues of moral importance.

If preferences differ across identity contexts, elites may mobilize supporters differently in the pursuit of different proximate ends, or individuals may align themselves with different partners to address different needs. In either case, the tendency to describe conflict between all identity types under an umbrella of ethnic conflict disguises these patterns. Models that treat groups simply as groups explain a spectrum of conflicts with concise logic, yet they fall short in recognizing some of the systematic differences that arise across identity contexts.

5. What Remains to be Done or, If You Had 5 Million Euro to Engage in a Project, What Would You Do? What is the Theory You Would Explore and Method and Sources You Would Employ?

Significant advances in our understanding of ethnic conflict, I argued above, have come largely from improvements in large-*n* data sets, along with mixed methods approaches to the exploration of causal inferences. The less useful developments, conversely, stem from the field's treatment of ethnic conflict as an umbrella concept encompassing several types of social identity, thereby encouraging researchers to treat differences between types of groups in conflict as a black box. What we can do next, then, is to take the best of the work we have done and use it to improve the field's shortcomings, refining our understanding of the diverse types of groups in conflict that exist under the umbrella.

5.1. *The Research Question*

I would explore variation in access to resources as a determinant of ethnic group change and identity group conflict. Are identity groups whose boundaries meet in resource-rich areas more likely to engage in conflict, or does conflict emerge more frequently when resources lie squarely within one identity group's stronghold? How do identity group bounds shift over time in relation to natural resource abundance, scarcity, and discovery?

Do religious and ethnic groups pursue conflict in different ways when confronted with different patterns in social composition or access to resources?

Examining these questions constitutes a critical next-step for political scientists. By evaluating how identity groups change in their constitution, and how the tendency of those groups to engage in conflict shifts with changes in resource access, we position ourselves to learn new things about the fluid nature of ethnic groups, only now in a systematic and rigorous manner. The project could thus build on two of the key advances our field has made: one in terms of treating identity groups as complex, constructed, and often overlapping political groups, and the second in terms of using new forms of data to track geographic, psychological, and economic changes more systematically in the course of conflict.

5.2.   *The Theoretical Framework*

I would test the theory that group members at the geographic cores of an ethnic or religious group treat control of land as a stronger incentive to engage in violence than do group members at the geographic peripheries of those identity groups. If resources—in this case land, and the attachments to land that develop over time—are a key determinant of ethnic conflict, we should expect that when groups come into contact near their geographic cores, violence is protracted, since those lands would be perceived as non-negotiable resources central to the identity itself. Conversely, when groups come into contact at their geographic peripheries, we should anticipate that geographic territory and lands would be less central to the identity itself, and negotiation may thus result in accelerated ends to conflicts. We might also expect, however, that religious and ethnic groups would treat attachments to land in systematic (and perhaps different) ways, given both the sacred texts that delineate territorial importance for world religious groups and the importance of local club goods to ethnic groups.

5.3.   *The Research Methods*

With 5 million euro, researchers could collect individual-level survey data with location coordinates in order to code regions according to ethnolinguistic and religious strongholds, mixed areas, and fault lines—not just in terms of self-identity patterns, but also in terms of salience, to be updated regularly as political contexts change. The same could be done for other identity types. The benefit of doing so with location-based data and the self-identification choices of local residents is that the research project would not need to impose group labels or group boundaries; residents themselves would do that by virtue of their aggregated responses.

As a tentative exploration of one part of this theory, I coded the conflicts in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) data set according to geographic location in the traditional Middle East (which may be viewed as a geographic core of some world religions), the fault line region of sub-Saharan Africa where Christianity and Islam meet just south of the Sahara desert, and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. I then limited the data set to those conflicts that Svensson (2007) characterizes as religious in nature. The sample size is small, but as Figure 1 illustrates, religious conflicts in the Middle East last an average of 15.5 years, whereas those along the Muslim-Christian fault line in Africa last only 5.6
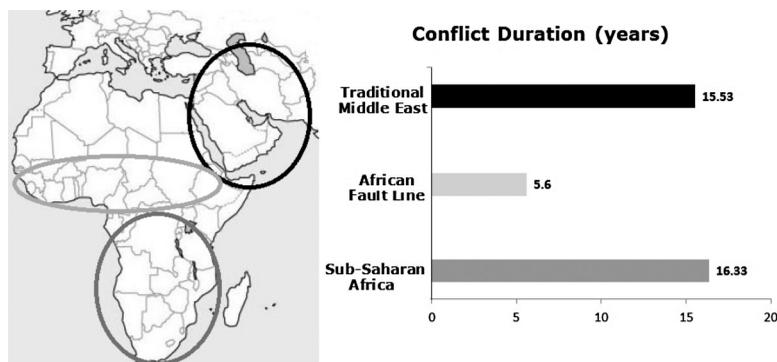
Figure 1. Average duration of religious identity conflicts, by region

Notes: Conflict duration data from the UCDP. The same pattern persists for Religious Incompatibility Conflicts (the alternative categorization from Svensson, 2007). Country inclusion in the Traditional Middle East relies on World Bank categorization. The fault line region is determined by the presence of two major religions and geographic segregation between them (consult author for details). Sub-Saharan African countries are all those below the fault line. Observations are too few to generate statistically significant differences: Middle East $n = 15$, Fault Line Africa $n = 10$, and sub-Saharan Africa $n = 3$.

years.[2] Those data suggest that indeed not all fault lines are alike, and that conflicts at religious cores may be more intractable than those at religious peripheries.

Additional individual- and community-level data could elucidate the motivations underpinning these conflicts. Survey experiments could be leveraged to evaluate the weight that respondents attach to distinct rationales for conflict. Common pool resource games could be exploited to measure intergroup tensions in crosscutting and overlapping identity contexts, and at the geographic cores and peripheries of identity groups. Framing experiments could be employed to disaggregate ethnic, religious, and other identity preferences in settings far removed from the studies I have conducted in West Africa.

My hope, of course, is that ethnic conflict continue to abate. So long as incentives exist for groups to compete violently and political institutions lack the strength to prevent it, we should at least strive to understand its determinants and patterns. Data that gets inside the black box of identity to understand diverse motivations can help us do exactly that.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Hendrix (2010) analyses competing definitions of state capacity, arguing that low levels of rational legality, autocraticness, and patrimonialism best describe strong state institutions.
2. Religious conflicts in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, south of the fault line region, are also protracted, though the sample size is very limited ($n = 3$); most conflicts in those countries have been coded as ethnic rather than religious.

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