Chapter 4
Shared Perspectives in Ethnic Conflict:
Sharing Theoretical Knowledge across Multiple Disciplines

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines theoretical perspectives on ethnic conflict across several disciplines. Multiple academic disciplines have addressed ethnic conflict with the tools available in their fields of research. A less thoroughly researched aspect of ethnic conflict is what most valuable contributions are shared across disciplinary boundaries. This chapter will touch on approaches from social sciences, political science, cognitive science, communication studies, and lay views of ethnic conflict. This study is a first step into this topic and yields some important ideas for future research for analyzing ethnic conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic allegiance drives minor and major actions in the world from peaceful cooperation to violence. Division by ethnic allegiance arises from aspects of familiar ties, tribalism, and ethnic loyalty. Scholars from many disciplines, including sociology, political science, cognitive science, economics, and communication studies, seek to understand the impact of ethnic division. They seek to explain divisions along cultural divides, ethnicity, group loyalty, political power, and ethnic competition. The disciplinary perspectives exist independently as well as sharing theoretical overlaps.

The aspects of shared approaches which various perspectives offer in the project of analyzing ethnic conflict are worthy of increased study. Beginning steps have been taken in understanding shared or shareable disciplinary approaches to analyzing ethnic conflict (Kanbur, Rajaram, & Varshney, 2011).

Understanding perspectives from multiple disciplines can likely yield an approach useful to the understanding of how ethnic differences result in compromise or conflict. This chapter summarizes analysis from five fields, namely, sociology, political science, economics, cognitive science, and communication studies and seeks to find connections between those analyses as well as aspects that might be borrowed from each toward the goal of understanding of ethnicity and ethnic conflict.

Communication studies, one of the five disciplines studied here, is central to studying human behavior throughout the world. The study of communication includes analyzing human actions through what messages and meanings are intended or understood by individuals in the world. The aspects of communication studies that observe message behaviors offer strong connections to other disciplines (Cibangu, 2015). Communication researchers are offered a perspective that observe practices and research directions employed in multiple fields of study for understanding ethnic conflict. This chapter seeks to identify theoretical approaches from separate disciplines that might intersect when analyzing ethnic conflict. This investigation is grounded in communication studies, however, it seeks to offer value for other fields.

In the fields of research which address ethnic conflict, studies exist into many aspects including ethnic stability, changing loyalties, methods of enforcing alliance, skin, language and religion. These different research perspectives have sought to answer questions about what forces lead to growing political polities and shrinking cultural groups. Scholars seek to know what commonalities bind and separate humans, and which conditions lead to successful communication in contrast to circumstances when communication fails. Questions about what is conflict, when does ethnicity matter, and how nation-states can succeed with diverse populations continue to drive scholarship concerning ethnic conflict. This chapter hopes to show some common ties across disciplines.

This chapter will define ethnicity, explore understandings of conflict, summarize some approaches from different disciplines, examples of analyses of select ethnic conflicts, and conclude with reports of efforts at resolving ethnic conflicts. Understanding of ethnic difference and ethnic conflict is built through discussion, research and theory building. Approaching a conceptual understanding of ethnicity and ethnic conflict sometimes seems like exploring Russian nesting dolls. Ethnic conflict can be viewed as personal interaction, group interaction, evolutionary drives, social imperatives, political calculations, or economic strategies. Each discipline often uses different language to express findings about ethnic conflict.

To explore the findings about ethnic conflict which are shared across disciplinary boundaries requires some grounding in the definitions of the topic. Common ground between the study finding from diverse fields requires common understanding of terms and concepts. Social scientists have expressed some of their findings using both complex language, or ordinary language terms and meaning that derive from observation and popular usage (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). The alternative approach taken to ethnic conflict, in this chapter, opens the discussion to aspects of ethnic conflict that are problematic and contentious. The first step in analyzing the features of ethnic conflict is to examine the various meanings of the term ethnicity.

BACKGROUND

Beginning to locate shared approaches to understanding ethnic conflict requires understanding ethnicity and conflict. The definitions and meanings of both ethnicity and conflict differ across and with disciplines. This chapter will not be able to resolve differences in connotation and denotation of these terms,

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