Ethnopolitical Conflict

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What is it?

Conflict between two or more groups is termed "ethnopolitical" when ethnicity and religion are highly implicated in the ongoing state of hostility. These are intergroup conflicts where group member attitudes, stereotypes, and forms of communication reflect the ethnopolitical context. Group members interact with one another on the basis of social categories (e.g., Israeli Jew versus Palestinian Arab; Northern Ireland Catholic versus Protestant; Hutu versus Tutsi; Sinhalese versus Tamil) and issues of identity, religion, and nationality are salient. Ethnopolitical conflicts are particularly resistant to resolution because they are less subject to rational negotiation and more influenced by issues of deep personal identity, inviolability of space considered holy or sanctified, and psychological issues related to historical injustice, group vulnerability, and victimhood.

Who uses the concept?

Ethnopolitical conflicts are mostly the research and theoretical domain of psychology, communication, and political science. Ethnopolitical conflicts are intractable, frequently linked with ideas related to macro and micro levels of analysis and resolution. Political scientists approach the problem from the macro level (the state) seeking political solutions through power sharing and consociation. Psychologists and communication theorists work at a more micro level seeking the individual change necessary for transformed relationships. Communication scholars focus on deliberative democracy, dialogue, and interpersonal contact as the sites for change and work to incorporate these changes into the conflict.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Conflict between ethnopolitically divided groups stands squarely at the center of intercultural dialogue being by definition a culturally-based disagreement between groups. Ethnopolitical conflicts are defined by cultural differences and subject to all of the theories, techniques, and practices associated with intercultural dialogue. Even when ethnopolitical conflicts are managed at a macro political level, real change and transformation take place at the interpersonal level where individuals from different cultures confront one another for growth and problem solving.

What work remains?

The role of communication as a mechanism for the changes necessary to resolve ethnopolitical conflicts is understudied. Members of competing groups identify positively with their own group and negatively with an outgroup, leading to various distortions, misperceptions, biases, and stereotypes all requiring additional research. Future work must explore the extent to which interpersonal contact generalizes to group attitudes conducive to managing differences, as well as the role of religion and ethnic identity related to democracy and political processes, since these cultural categories must be integrated into lasting solutions.

Resources

Ellis, D. G. (2006). *Transforming conflict: Communication and ethnopolitical conflict.* New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

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