



UNDERSTANDING THE ESSENCE OF ETHNIC CONFLICT: A THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Although, there is a vast amount of literature on ethnic conflict produced in recent decades, there is no good systematic overview of the main arguments and hypothesis on the core themes around the triggers of ethnic conflict. This article asks about the main arguments and gaps in terms of ethnic conflict literature in three theme areas, all of which were identified in a keyword analysis involving the relationships between: 1) ethnicity; 2) the (perceived) grievances and opportunities between various groups; and 3) the role of a group's size in terms of groups being able to mobilise. This semi-systematic review is based on a total of 96 relevant scientific articles that have been published in English language journals since 1990. This review provides a roadmap for researchers in this field so that they can navigate through the extensive literature to be able to provide future research directions. The results of the review show that competing arguments prevail in the available literature. There is no commonly agreed explanation between scholars on what causes ethnic conflict. Rather, there are several competing and complementary hypotheses, each of which is debated by others. Different results are based on different forms of methodology and datasets. In order to further empirical knowledge and common understanding, I suggest that future research focuses on: 1) the role on the perceived grievances of groups that can serve to mobilise them, and therefore adopt meso-level and/or micro-level data variables to test known theories and hypothesis in relation to ethnic conflict; 2) to better the understanding of the role of ethnicity in the collective action; and 3) strengthen arguments about the relationship between polarisation and conflict.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, instead of the traditional interstate military conflict, we have seen the emergence of increasing amounts of sub-state identity-based violence (such as in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Rwanda, the Balkan states that formerly made up Yugoslavia, and Nagorno-Karabakh). This has also spiked the interest of scholars and policy analysts when it comes to better understanding the potential for an outbreak of ethnic strife and the evolution of power relations in the region. Robert Malley from the International Crisis Group points out that local conflicts serve as mirrors for global trends: the process governing how conflicts start, unfold, and are resolved reflect shifts in the relations between the great powers, the intensity of their competition, and the breadth of the ambitions of regional players. In addition, to be able to ensure cohesive communities and to develop preventive mechanisms, it is important to understand the origins and drivers of conflict between different ethnic groups.

An ethnic conflict is a confrontation between at least two contending ethnic groups (Varshney, 2002; Lehtsaar, 2015). While the source of the conflict may be political, social, economic, or religious, those individuals who are involved in such a conflict must expressly fight for the position of their ethnic group within the overall society. This criterion differentiates ethnic conflict from other forms of struggle. There is no commonly agreed explanation between scholars about what causes ethnic conflict. Rather, there are several competing and complementary hypotheses, each of which can be debated. Based on the vast amount of existing literature that covers ethnic conflict, we can point out the likelihood that confrontation between different groups is related to the following issues: discrimination, inequality, perceived injustice, a sense of danger, mistrust, exclusion from power, various and conflicting values, a lack of cultural awareness, and a lack of cultural empathy (see Katz, 1965; Kreidler, 1984; Moore, 2003; Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; Cederman *et al*, 2011). However, there are a great many factors that are debated by scholars as an explanation for conflict, including the following: structural factors, such as weak or poorly-governed states (Fearon, 2011, Sambanis, 2004); weak territorial control (Lindemann, 2014); government repression (Lindemann, 2014; Hegre *et al*, 2001); population pressure, and a sudden shift in population size (Sambanis, 2001; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003);

including an unequal population size (Homer-Dixon, 2001), and the existence of a high proportion within that population of young males (Collier *et al*, 2006; Goldstone, 2001); globalisation (Ishiyama, 2004); a scarcity of resources or unequal access to valuable resources like oil and gas (Ross, 2004; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Lujala, *et al*, 2007); environmental scarcity (such as access to water) and climate change (Sirin, 2011; Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016); an experience of prior conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Vanhanen, 2012), or new technological means (such as that provided by the internet or social media) which fosters mobilisation (Cronin, 2006). However, what is mostly agreed upon is the conclusion that ethnic conflict is the result of mixed motivations (Bara, 2014; Carment, 2017) and opportunities (Collier, Hoeffler & Sambanis, 2005; Fuller *et al*, 2002).

Research into the field of ethnic conflict is accelerating at a tremendous speed, being fragmented and interdisciplinary. Despite the wide body of available research, however, there has been a lack of any systematic overview of the main arguments regarding the triggers behind ethnic conflict. So that it can provide an input (or some degree of value) for the scientific community in the field of ethnic conflict, this paper asks the following research questions: 1) what are the competing hypothesis for the reasons behind a conflict; and 2) what gaps in the research need to be addressed in the future to harmonise current understanding. Therefore, the goals of this paper are as follows: 1) to identify the central thematic aspects in literature that revolves around the subject of ethnic conflict; 2) to provide an overview of significant debates, highlighting those areas in which consensus has been achieved, and to uncover which aspects have not yet received enough attention in the available literature covering ethnic conflict or in existing empirical studies; and 3) to provide recommendations and directions for future research.

This paper has been assembled in a review format. It follows the general structure of a semi-systematic literature review (Snyder, 2019). Following the introduction, Section 2 presents the method being used here for literature mining, and identifies the main themes in that literature. Section 3 presents the results for the thematic literature analysis. In this section, I review the past and present research focuses, and existing hypotheses and theories. In Section 4, research gaps are explored and some guidance is provided for possible avenues to be taken in terms of future research. Finally, Section 5 concludes the study with a summary of the research and findings.

2. THE LITERATURE MINING PROCESS

To be able to establish a comprehensive collection of approaches to ethnic conflict, a search of English language publications was conducted, initially using the keywords 'ethnic conflict' and 'ethnic violence'. From these searches, new keywords emerged, such as 'horizontal inequalities' and 'ethnic grievances', which were additionally explored. Searches were carried out through academic literature databases, such as Taylor & Francis, SAGE, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. I combined the full-text searches with those which listed only publications in which the terms were explicitly named as a major (sub-) topic in the title or in the abstract, and/or the publications in question focused on the determinants that trigger ethnic conflict based on theory or empirical country studies. In addition, relevant publications were identified as they were cited in the publications I scrutinised.

Although the review draws on schools of thought that have evolved over several decades, it emphasises the most-recent empirical findings. I limited my search to recent literature on ethnic conflict, published since 1990, because this is when ethnic conflict became a prominent issue for both academia and policymakers. Before the 1990s the question 'what causes ethnic violence?' was rarely asked (Toft, 2017), with few exceptions, such as Donald Horowitz (1985). Since the early 1990s, the collection of quantitative data that is based on case studies has made it possible to gain a better understanding of the triggers behind ethnic conflict.

The literature search resulted in around 620 results, mainly of peer-reviewed articles, books, and essays. Following a critical review of these results, about 96 relevant articles were chosen for the thematic literature review, all of which met the initial search criteria and provided sufficient input for the research questions.

Keyword analysis

The relevant literature, including most central or pivotal empirical research and theory on ethnic conflict, was synthesised in an inductive way by determining a set of relevant dimensions of ethnic conflict.

The dimensions were drawn from the keyword analysis, which has been indicated (above) by the authors in the articles. All of the keywords from a total of 96 articles were inserted into Nvivo 11 and analysed by word frequency (only stem words were used). This provided an understanding of the essential issues being discussed in the articles. Although there were also some minor topics, I focused on the main themes. The top ten most frequently-used keywords were compiled into Figure 1. The bigger the block in Fig 1, the more a word was found to be present in the keywords. For example, the keyword ‘ethnic’,* was counted a total of 95 times, while ‘grievances’ was counted fourteen times. Keywords, such as ‘conflict’, ‘violence’, ‘war’, ‘civil’, and ‘political’, were part of phrases, such as ‘ethnic conflict’, ‘civil war’, and ‘political violence’. ‘Ethnic’ was also used for ‘ethnicity’. Based on the results, I identified three thematic fields: 1) ethnicity and identity; 2) grievances and inequality; and 3) the presence of several ethnic groups.

KEYWORDS

ethnic	conflict	wars	political	groups	
				identity	inequality
		civil	violence	grievances	

FIGURE 1: The top ten most-used keywords as taken from the literature review (the chart has been drawn up using the Nvivo 11 program).

Based on the results of the keywords analysis, I will focus on three thematic areas. Firstly, ethnic group identities are a resource for mobilisation (Østby, 2008). Scholars argue that ethnicity provides a certain strategic opportunity for group mobilisation that can be used when fighting for economic and political goals (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Kaufmann, 2005). Secondly, the competition of ‘grievance’ versus ‘greed’ schools of thought, which, firstly, suggests that ethnic conflict is more likely when ethnic groups suffer from (perceived) relative deprivation (Gurr, 2000) and,

secondly, a group of scholars argues for opportunity factors to be present so that a conflict may occur (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). The third widely-observed aspect in the literature that covers ethnic conflict is the relative demographic size of one group in comparison with other groups within the state (Cederman *et al*, 2011; Posner, 2004), or the concentration of a group within a specific area of territory (Toft, 2003; Klačnja & Novta, 2016). This leads to the question of whether group polarisation or fractionalisation is a better indicator for measuring conflict. Different hypotheses regarding these issues are examined in detail in the following sub-sections.

3. THE RESULTS OF THE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

3.1. UNDERSTANDING ‘ETHNICITY’ IN ETHNIC CONFLICT

Ethnic conflict has been explained by means of various identity-related theories. The identity of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the related uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007) have both been used to explain why perpetrating violence on behalf of one’s group is expected to increase identification with that group. Identity tends to be related to more deep-rooted values, such as one’s sense of self-esteem and basic human needs; and threats to identity therefore produce a strong response. According to the uncertainty-identity theory, individuals identify with groups to reduce uncertainty about their self and their place in the world (Hogg, 2007). In addition, for those individuals who have fewer segments to their overall identity, identification strengthens in terms of the few identity segments they do have (Hogg & Adelman, 2013) and in contrast to others.

To be able to understand ethnic conflict, we must first understand the concept of ethnicity and what role it plays in mobilising groups. A good many studies do not differentiate between ethnicity and ethnic group (Vanhanen, 1999; Albert, 2014; Carment, 2017). People who share ethnic traits do not automatically constitute an ethnic group, however. People must consciously acknowledge that they belong to a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), such as in terms of identifying themselves with in-group members and distinguishing themselves from non-group (‘out-group’) members. A sense of collective belonging may include markers that are based on common descent, language, religion, race, or history, or a combination of these (Fearon, 2006; Horowitz, 1985; Wimmer, 2013; Gundelach & Manatschal, 2017). There are numerous descent-based attributes, but only a few of them become socially and politically relevant. In the past few decades there has been a sharp increase in violent sectarian or religious tensions, ranging from Islamic extremists waging global jihad, to the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, and outbreaks of violence between Christians and Muslims in Egypt (Kishi, 2018). Religious boundaries are often argued to incite violence

(Reynal-Querol, 2002; Fox, 2000) and, as religious identities are particularly salient for individuals, this makes conflict resolution difficult (Toft, 2007; Wellman & Tokuno, 2004).

In addition, language can become a key in-group/out-group marker (Smirnova & Iliev, 2017) and a tool for discrimination (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). However, conflicts that are based on language divisions have showed mixed results when it comes to their being covered by empirical studies. For example, Collier & Hoeffler (2004) and Fearon & Laitin (2003) did not find any link between language and intergroup violence, concluding that linguistic divides may ease peaceful political solutions. Laitin (2007, p 59) makes the point that language is not exclusive, unlike religion and race; individuals can learn an additional language without changing their beliefs or identities. If so, armed conflict should be relatively rare when ethnic groups are mobilised based on linguistic boundaries (Laitin, 2000; Rørbæk, 2017). Furthermore, the dataset which covers Ethno-Linguistic Fractionalisation (ELF) (Reyna-Querol, 2002), which coded linguistic groups, was harshly criticised for its use when explaining political conflict because language cannot be an autonomous factor in explaining conflict. Other scholars, such as Montalvo & Reynal-Querol (2005), found a positive and statistically significant effect between intergroup violence and ethnolinguistic polarisation.

The idea that we can identify and categorise people and place them in certain groups is still open to debate. The disagreement about the role of ethnicity in the onset of conflict stems from a more fundamental debate over whether ethnic identity is even a meaningful category in terms of understanding group behaviour, or whether these identities are (re) created and instrumentalised by leaders to create conflict so that they can grasp political or economic power (Watts *et al*, 2017). For example, research by Jakobsen *et al* (2016) supports the argument that conflicts which are taking place along ethnic lines are not caused primarily by primordial hatred between different ethnic groups, but that they indicate the possibility that ethnicity may be used as an instrument to create violent conflict. That argument is supported by Jenne *et al* (2007), who concluded that ethnicity can provide leaders with the strategic leverage needed for recruiting group members to fight for a cause or, as other authors found, can be used as an instrument to retain power and control (Gagnon, 2000; Snyder, 2000).

On the other hand, Cederman & Wucherpfennig (2017) highlight their finding that ethnic conflicts are typically about ‘nationality problems’ of self-rule and are driven by political and economic inequalities between groups. Bhavnani and Miodownik (2008, p 45) also find that ethnicity is a key determinant of conflict if individuals are attached to their ethnic identities and, therefore, ethnic salience should take centre stage in explanations that attempt to forge a link between ethnicity and conflict. Some authors argue that ethnicity will increase the likelihood of conflict (as a secondary effect) if group-belonging becomes the basis for determining political and socio-economic access and control (Gurr, 1970; Wimmer *et al*, 2009), or if it is territory-based and has secessionist and/or separatist demands (Toft, 2002). Some authors see the likelihood of ethnic conflict reoccurring if conflict has existed previously between the involved groups. Mattes & Savun (2009, p 754) point out that conflicts with an ethnic component are nearly twice as likely to reoccur. Ethnicity is believed to intensify conflict according to some studies (Costalli & Moro, 2011; Montalvo & Reynal-Querol 2005; Weidmann, 2011), but in others this correlation has not held true. For example, Klačnjaja and Novta (2016) demonstrated that in highly ethnically-polarised societies, increased ethnic segregation served to decrease the incidence and intensity of conflict. Korostelina (2008) in her research looked into the formation process of national identity and showed that in Crimea, the civic concept of national identity significantly reduced the readiness for conflict amongst ethnic minorities; and the position of a minority within the nation regulated the readiness to fight with other groups.

Albert (2014) makes the case that ethnic group identity has substantial effects on collective action, particularly violent conflict, and a mechanism must exist to predict behaviour so that ethnic group identity can be properly measured. For that purpose he created a measurement for ethnic group identity - the Ethnic Group Identity Index (EGII). Although ethnicity is a convenient and salient marker when it comes to identifying a particular conflict as an ethnic conflict, its deeper role in mobilising different groups is still up for discussion.

3.2. THE ROLE OF GROUP GRIEVANCES IN ETHNIC CONFLICT

The second dilemma that is central to the literature covering ethnic conflict – and something that has divided scholars of intrastate conflict for decades – is the ‘grievance’ versus ‘greed’ factors as a cause of conflict. Scholars question whether violent conflict is more likely when an ethnic group suffers from perceived or real grievances, or could conflicts be the product of an environment in which conflict can thrive? The ‘grievance’ school of thought relies largely on the relative deprivation theory that was formulated by Gurr (1970) in the 1970s. Gurr’s theory is based on the concept that individuals may feel deprived of some desirable object or item that is relevant to their own past, or to other individuals or groups, or to some other form of social category (Walker, & Pettigrew, 1984). He highlighted political and socio-economic inequalities as motivational forces behind ethnic conflict. When there is a gap between the expectations of certain values and the capability of being able to obtain and maintain them, this creates grievances and feelings of injustice, which in turn may lead to an increase in the level of frustration and then to violent conflict. Literature regards the psychological factors of relative deprivation and frustration as a major force behind violent actions. The experiment by Shaykhutdinov & Bragg (2011) highlighted the relationship between frustration and conflict: when participants feel their autonomy and ability to express their group identity is seriously threatened, they are more likely to choose protest over negotiation.

The debate regarding ‘greed’ or opportunity factors in an intergroup conflict was ignited by Collier & Hoeffler (2004), who suggested that conflict is driven either by greed or grievances. They questioned the grievance-based approach because those situations in which people want to rebel are ever-present, and just inequalities cannot explain the reasons behind such conflict. In other hand, they found that opportunity factors in which people can rebel are quite rare when it comes to their constituting an explanation for conflict (Bara, 2014). Collier & Hoeffler (2004) showed that economic incentives (the opportunity to loot) are the main reasons for violent conflict. This argument was supported by research by Fearon & Laitin (2003) in which they concluded that the risk of conflict lies rather in the conditions that favour rebellion, such as poverty, a weak state, and political instability. Earlier work by Collier & Hoeffler is still

widely cited today, and a large number of country studies are therefore based on their greed theory, while excluding the grievance factors.

Despite the popularity of the work of Collier & Hoeffler, subsequent empirical studies and statistical modelling have shown that conflict involves a more complex interplay of incentives and opportunity factors (Goodhand, 2003; Ballentine & Sherman, 2003, pp 6; Korf, 2005, pp 201-202; Østby, 2008; Sambanis, 2005, pp 329; Brown, 2009; Østby *et al*, 2011; Kruglanski *et al*, 2009; Monahan, 2012; Saucier *et al*, 2009; Lindemann, 2014; Hillesund *et al*, 2018). For example, Lindemann (2014) developed a nine-factor model of ethnic conflict (involving four grievances and five opportunity factors) study conflict trajectories in similar ethnic groups (the Kurds in Turkey and Syria). Stewart (2002) came up with the horizontal inequality concept, which provides an explanation both for the motive and opportunity required for people to engage in violence. Even Collier & Hoeffler, based upon their research on sixteen case studies, later abandoned the either/or argument and agreed that more complex models which consider greed and grievance together as motives for violent conflict should instead be used (Collier, Hoeffler, & Sambanis, 2005).

3.3. DEMOGRAPHIC ASYMMETRY: DOES GROUP SIZE MATTER?

An important prerequisite for the emergence of intergroup conflict that comes up in literature covering ethnic conflict is the ability of groups to rally their members around a common goal, including generating a readiness to act on behalf of the group (Olson, 1965; Østby, 2008; Østby *et al*, 2009, Kustov, 2017; Stewart, 2008). Group size and territorial concentration indicate a group's capacity to mobilise (Weidmann, 2009; Toft, 2002). Small groups may not be able to gather together enough resources (such as money, weapons, or skills, for instance), and groups that scattered far and wide may face problems in coordination (Bara, 2014). This, however, does not mean that small groups cannot interrupt societal peace. Instead, they may simply turn to non-traditional tactics, such as terrorism or rebellion to, cope with the problems raised by asymmetry (Sambanis & Shayo, 2013; Cook & Olsen Lounsbery, 2017; Ghatak, *et al*, 2019).

Most scholars have found that the risk of intrastate violence decreases or is negatively correlated in highly homogeneous and highly diverse societies (Horowitz, 1985; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Reynal-Querol, 2002; Ellingsen, 2000; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Østby *et al*, 2009; Costalli & Moro, 2011). For example, Costalli & Moro (2011) found empirical support for the claim that in those areas in which one group was dominant – i.e. where they formed at least 75 per cent of the total population of a municipality, or where they formed the second-largest ethnic group but did not exceed 20 per cent of the total population – the level of violence was lower. Dominant groups are usually less motivated to pick up arms, as they already hold power and privilege in such a society and, in contrast, marginalised groups lack the resources. Therefore, for dominant groups to be able to take part in violent conflict, they should be motivated by factors, such as fear that their privilege is about to be taken away, or by a more aggressive desire to dominate other groups (Stewart, 2002). Wegenast & Basedau (2014), however, showed that this is not always the case, and found that in certain circumstances, high levels of ethnic diversity could be a potential risk factor in terms of conflict. In their study, oil provided an incentive for marginalised groups to overcome the collective action problem.

The risk of ethnic conflict has mostly been associated with high levels of polarisation. Polarisation is at its highest when a society is composed of two equally-sized ethnic groups. The probability is of violence being more prone to erupt in an environment in which exists two groups of approximately the same size with opposing goals, rather than in an environment in which a number of small groups is present, or one single dominant group. This was first illustrated by Horowitz (1985) and Esteban & Ray (1994), but was subsequently supported by the work of other scholars (see, for example, Hegre, 2008; Schneider & Wiesehomeier, 2008; Bhavnani & Miodownik, 2008; Cederman & Girardin, 2007; Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2005; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Ellingsen, 2000). Ellingsen (2000) proved in her research that in countries in which the population share of the dominant group is less than eighty per cent, intrastate conflict is more frequently experienced than it is in more homogeneous countries. The model by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) showed that societies in which the largest ethnic group forms 45 per cent and ninety per cent of the population total have around double the risk of conflict. Presumably this is because such societies have both the power and the incentive to exploit their minorities.

A similar threshold has been used by Jakobsen et al (2016), who suggested that each group must constitute at least 35 per cent of the total population for its members to feel safe. If this level is lower, individuals will feel that their group's position, culture, ethnicity, or status is threatened. They argued that in every society there is a turning point of tolerance, i.e. up to a certain point intergroup contact will increase tolerance, and after the level is reached, any further diversity will lead to less tolerance.

The negative effect of new residents or a sudden immigration influx in the attitudes of natives has also been shown in other studies (see Karreth *et al*, 2015; Meuleman *et al*, 2009; Putnam, 2007). Spain (1993) explained that when the number of new residents reaches critical mass, and when resources are reallocated and subsequently privatised, conflicts over values and the definitions of community eventually ensue between 'been-heres' and 'come-heres'. Outsiders create conflict when they reach a critical mass that allows them to turn the community to their own advantage. To avoid this, Singapore has set a quota for non-Malaysian households at five per cent in a specific neighbourhood and at eight per cent in a block (Non-citizens..., 2019).

High polarisation has been quite an accurate predictor for conflict, along with the duration of conflict (Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2005), and the severity of the ensuing violence. Costalli & Moro (2011) concluded in their essay that four municipalities which belonged to the list of the ten most polarised areas in Bosnia-Herzegovina during 1992–1995 were also included in the list of the ten most violent municipalities, while none of the ten most diverse municipalities appeared in such a list. Subsequently, research by Kustov (2017) challenged preceding arguments that polarisation increases conflict. Contrarily, his computational analysis suggested the opposite. He showed that there is no 'most hazardous' ethnic structure *per se* and both polarisation and cross-cuttingness appear to decrease the likelihood of conflict, but also to increase the potential intensity of conflict.

Therefore, conflict is not simply a function of group size alone. Recent studies have demonstrated that it is not only high levels of polarisation that makes conflict more likely, but that segregation and polarisation jointly determine the spread of any conflict (see Lim *et al*, 2007; Klačnja & Novta, 2016). Klačnja & Novta (2016) proved in their research that

for highly ethnically polarised societies, increasing ethnic segregation decreased the incidence and intensity of conflict. In contrast, in societies with low ethnic polarisation, increasing segregation increases conflict.

4. RESEARCH GAPS AND FURTHER RESEARCH NEEDS

Some of those research gaps and dilemmas that I was able to identify in the thematic literature are now summarised below:

4.1. ETHNICITY

Although substantial areas of general knowledge have been accumulated to explain the role of ethnic identity in mobilising groups towards committing violent action, there is still little to be known about the processes that link identity, leadership, and mobilisation (Gurr, 2017). As mentioned above, is identity a mean or is it a reason for collective action? What is the relationship between ethnicity as a concept and the likelihood, frequency, or intensity of identity-based conflict?

Furthermore, although, there are studies in existence that focus on different ethnic markers (such as language, religion, or origins), and on conflict, some scholars argue that different ethnic markers are not unique and a more general concept of ethnicity should be adopted, one which treats various ascriptive markers as being functionally equivalent (Rørbæk, 2017). As different ethnic markers are valid in different societies, the process of finding a common salient ethnic marker that is comparable in cross-national studies becomes a more difficult exercise. From this point of view, I would question first whether the role of different markers is so essential, or is the understanding of how strongly people identify with their group and how their behaviour can lead to mobilisation instead the central argument when it comes to understanding ethnic conflict? This line of research has already been started by Albert (2014) with his EGII, which seeks to measure the strength of ethnic group identity. Continuing empirical research on the role of ethnicity in terms of conflict would address these dilemmas.

4.2. PERCEIVED GRIEVANCES

One aspect that has not been at the forefront in the existing grievance literature and in previous empirical studies is group perception. The link between objective grievances and perceived grievances has been considered only in few studies. However, for example, objective inequalities cannot automatically be translated into perceived inequality. Therefore, the concept of grievances is subject to misperceptions and manipulation (Must, 2016). It becomes clear that researchers must keep in mind the thought that for conflict to break out, it is not enough that group members perceive inequality between groups; they must also come to find the situation unjust (Cederman, *et al*, 2013; Must, 2016). Miodownik & Nir (2016), in their cross-national comparative multilevel analyses of the Afrobarometer dataset, are able to confirm that subjective perceptions both amplify the effect of exclusion when it comes to the acceptance of violence and also alter the readiness towards dissent for those groups that are included. Although, research on the role of perceived inequality measures is somewhat sparse, with only limited geographical coverage (mainly covering African countries), it should not be overlooked.

4.2.1. *Micro-level data versus macro-level data*

The previous section highlights another weakness in the ‘grievance’ versus ‘greed’ literature: most of the empirical research is based on national (average) data, which explains the macro-level results using arguments that essentially operate at the micro level. Conflicts usually start and thrive at the local level, which is why only country-level measures, such as the Gin coefficient which measures income distribution amongst individuals (Cederman *et al*, 2011; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Hegre, 2008; Halika *et al*, 2020), the use of the unemployment rate to measure poverty levels (Halika *et al*, 2020), the use of national statistics and GIS data to measure population size and distribution (Cederman, *et al*, 2011; Klačnaja & Novta, 2016), all of which have been used by several scholars, fail to capture the motivations behind any conflict in terms of individual groups. I would therefore tend to be cautious when it comes to building up theories and research using variables that are based on country averages, as they do not capture the perceptions of group grievances which serve as a formidable tool for recruitment (Cederman *et al*, 2011). More attention must be given to linking data in regards to objective variables to data on

the perceived grievances of individuals or groups. In my mind, perceptual mechanisms are important where they can be used to understand group behaviour. People often act in terms of a socially-mediated understanding of their conditions, rather than in terms of the conditions themselves. Perceptions breed discontent and discontent leads to aggression.

It would therefore be irresponsible to dismiss the role of grievances in ethnic conflict studies; and more theoretical and empirical research at the meso-level and micro-level, using more sophisticated measures, should be favoured to revive the importance of grievance hypothesis in ethnic conflict literature. In understanding this problem, several scholars (such as Buhaug *et al*, 2009; Cunningham & Weidmann, 2010; Costalli & Moro, 2011; Rustad *et al*, 2011; Hillesund *et al*, 2018) have recently abandoned traditional cross-country analyses to focus instead on disaggregated data and internal diversity. They have also focused on variables that can be measured at the sub-national level (Halika *et al*, 2020; Hegre *et al*, 2019). Therefore, I agree with those authors who recommend taking the next step both in terms of the dynamics behind violent and non-violent ethnic conflict, and prioritising research at the local level (Hillesund *et al*, 2018; Stroschein, 2017; Jenne, 2017), or even going down to the individual level to properly investigate the micro-level mechanisms that are at play (Hillesund *et al*, 2018).

4.3. GROUP POLARISATION

The measure of society's polarisation is seemingly more theoretical than making use of its diversity and dominance, in terms of relative group size when compared to the rest of the groups in the territory, meaning that it is more relevant than simply noting the presence of several groups within a given area of territory. However, even if high levels of polarisation have been quite a good indicator for predicting ethnic conflict, the empirical evidence is mixed. Besides Kustov, some other studies do not explicate the correlations and, in some cases, the findings appear not to be empirically robust (Forsberg, 2008). Some authors (Caselli & Coleman, 2013; Bhavnani & Miodownik, 2008) point out that the summary statistics that have been used in previous studies (such as Fearon & Laitin 2003; Collier & Hoeffler 2004; Montalvo & Raynal-Querol, 2005) take the existing

ethnic structure of the population as being exogenous or assumes that ethnic salience is constant across individuals. This assumption, however, may lead to incorrect conclusions. Following this argument, Caselli & Coleman (2013) built their model on the prediction that relative group sizes change in response to conflict (such as when a defeated group joins the dominant one). Bhavnani & Miodownik (2008) also showed in their models that the results are different when ethnicity is a 'fixed salience', meaning that when salience was fixed, the onset of conflict was twice as likely at low levels of polarisation when compared to instances in which salience is permitted to vary, with the difference decreasing at high levels of polarisation.

The literature review showed the evolution of research on the correlation of simple group sizes and the risk of ethnic violence. While, in the middle of the 1980s, Horowitz showed that moderately diverse societies are more prone to conflict, recent empirical studies have failed to offer complete support for that hypothesis. Recent studies (see, for example, Kustov, 2017; Caselli & Coleman, 2013; Bhavnani & Miodownik, 2008) have pointed towards the weaknesses of polarisation as a variable when it comes to predicting conflict. Further empirical research, testing, and verification of the different variables, including population size, should therefore be addressed to discover an answer to the eternal question: in which kind of population setting is ethnic conflict most likely to be triggered?

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to review the available literature on ethnic conflict to be able to distil the essential elements of the phenomena and to provide a roadmap when it comes to being able to navigate through the vast body of available literature and arguments regarding the essence of ethnic conflict. This review summarised the main themes and hypotheses, and explored gaps in the current research, while focussing on three essential elements that are widely discussed in the available conflict literature. These elements were drawn up using the keyword analysis: understanding what role is played in ethnic conflict by ethnicity, (perceived) grievances, and opportunities; and what role is played by a group's population size.

The growing body of empirical research over the past few decades has shown that few, if any, scholars have attached any importance to mono-causal explanations of ethnic conflict. There is a strong body of support for the assumption that mixed motivations facilitate conflict. What this mix may consist of, however, is still an open question. Hopefully, further empirical research will help to strengthen the arguments, and statistically prove the relevance of various conflict variables (such as poverty, a weak state, feelings of discrimination, or inequality, or trust, limited resources, or population size), and through this explain which aspects may play a role in causing ethnic conflict. Current arguments and hypotheses are controversial. This has largely to do with different methodologies and datasets that are being used by scholars, while the limited number of regional studies (which focus mainly on African countries) do not provide a comprehensive body of knowledge which would make it possible to build up new theories or understanding regarding the triggers of ethnic conflict. I therefore have to conclude that the theories and techniques used in the available studies require further development and common areas. I can expect to find that many of the gaps that I have highlighted in this literature review could be further researched, especially those that are related to quantitative research on ethnic conflict at the sub-national level, along with the role of group perception in terms of mobilisation, and what role ethnicity plays in any given conflict. Growing empirical studies are definitely leading us towards greater research clarity, which is something that is very much needed to be able to expand the currently-polarised theoretical background.

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