For decades, political scientists have grappled with the role identity has played in ethnic conflict. Surprisingly, these scholars have been unsuccessful in rigorously conceptualising some key terms in the field of ethnic studies. How can the causal forces of ethnic strife be unravelled if scholars cannot even agree on the meanings of essential concepts? This article carefully delineates the differences between ethnicity, ethnic groups and ethnic group identity, while showing the conceptual mistakes of some of the field’s leading scholars. Often treated synonymously, these concepts are quite distinct: ignoring this not only makes for sloppy scholarship, but has grave policy consequences.

Ethnic studies have been an increasingly ‘sexy’ topic for political scientists over the past few decades. Among the best scholars analysing ethnic conflict are Stefan Wolff, Donald Horowitz, Richard Jenkins and Stuart Kaufman. Although each of these provides useful insights into ethnic conflict, none has succeeded in rigorously defining and distinguishing between the key concepts of ethnicity, the ethnic group and ethnic group identity. In fact, many scholars carelessly conflate these terms or use them interchangeably. Some argue that they are impossible to define truly because they are constructed and thus do not support rigorous conceptualisations. This article offers some terminology that will help make future analysis more effective. First, I argue that ethnicity is an ordering principle, but nothing more. Second, I address the characteristics that comprise an ethnic group and distinguish it from a mere category such as ethnicity. Third, I examine why ethnic group identity should be taken more seriously. I conclude by offering some reasons why these distinctions matter in both theory and practice, and proffer clearer definitions for each concept. I suggest that the political scientist should journey into other fields, especially sociology and anthropology, and incorporate some of their discussions on these conceptualisations.

Ethnicity is only an ordering principle and nothing more

One example of muddled thinking comes from a prominent political scientist investigating ethnic conflict: Stefan Wolff. Wolff (2006, p. 31) argues that ethnicity ‘above all, means identity with one’s own ethnic group ... everyone has an ethnic identity’. This statement makes it appear as though ethnicity is the same as ethnic group identity. This is not necessarily so. While most people have some type of...
identity, identities formed solely on cultural, religious, racial or gender bases do not always qualify as ethnic in nature. If we cannot understand the crucial differences in terminology, how can we possibly understand causes of ethnic conflict and the atrocities associated with it, such as ethnic cleansing and genocide? Is a conflict’s cause primarily rooted in ethnicity, or is it based upon other forces?

Kaufman (2001, p. 15) observes: ‘the terminology used in discussions about ethnic conflict is so confused, and confusing, that it is important to sort out the meanings of key terms before beginning the analysis’. If political scientists are to make headway in theory or policy, we must begin with proper terminology. The most basic unit to understand in ethnic studies is ethnicity. Not every person has an ethnicity and having an ethnicity does not make a person a member of an ethnic group, nor does it automatically create an ethnic group identity. A person can have certain ethnic traits without being a part of an ethnic group. If one is not a member of an ethnic group, one cannot have an ethnic group identity. Ethnicity is best understood as an ordering principle, or perhaps as a category, to differentiate one individual from another based upon specific traits. Ethnic conflict literature identifies several traits comprising ethnicity. Although this article does not attempt to provide all elements of ethnic signposts, it is useful to mention several. Most notable is ancestral homeland and its attached culture (Levine, 1999; Phinney, 2005). Further, markers of ethnicity are usually physical in nature. Horowitz (2000, p. 46) expounds: ‘Among visible cues, there are ... those that are birth-determined and bodily, such as color, physiognomy, hair color and texture, height, and physique’. He continues: ‘Then there are those that are not determined at birth but are also bodily: circumcision and earring holes ... also scarification, modification of earlobes, the filing or removal of certain ... teeth ... or the staining of teeth’ (Horowitz, 2000, p. 46). These ethnic traits are outward markers that help to categorise people based upon these traits. They are for labelling purposes only, removed from any larger meaning.

These just touch upon seemingly endless ethnic markers, but what is important to understand is that markers are not unchanging and do not define a group. They distinguish one individual from another, but they serve mainly as ethnic boundaries (Conversi, 1995, p. 82). For the purposes of ethnic group conflict, in isolation, ethnic markers ‘mean’ nothing. Ethnicity alone should not supply fuel for conflict, nor is it a helpful variable in conflict studies. For the political scientist studying ethnic group conflict, actions based on common understanding of a shared ethnicity or sense of belonging are more important than the ethnic markers themselves. Collective action, especially action that is attributed to a shared understanding of ethnicity, is what truly matters.

Some scholars argue that ethnicity is a trigger for ethnic politics. Jenkins (1997, pp. 55, 166), for example, believes ethnicity provides the motivation for collective being and collective action; further, Jenkins seems to imply throughout his book that ethnicity is similar to the sense of collective being and collective identity. This is contentious. Ethnicity is defined by the traits that distinguish one from another. Ethnicity is not the sense of collective being but, as Jonathan Hall (1997, p. 20) writes, ‘the definitional set of attributes by which membership in an ethnic group
is ultimately determined’. No personal meaning need be associated with ethnicity. It can exist separately or without any existential ontological references. When meaning and collective action merge – issues of ethno-discrimination, for instance – people with the same ethnicity form an ethnic group. The potential appears for conflict to evolve from collective action (e.g., protests, party politics). Ethnicity alone is not the cause of conflict between two individuals. It is, however, often the point at which the us/them dichotomy forms. Investigating ethnicity and its particular traits is less important than studying the bond ethnicity tends to create once a group has formed.

Contrary to some views, ethnicity is not synonymous with ethnic group identity. By concentrating solely on ethnicity as a variable in conflict, the greater factor may be overlooked: the bonds people have based upon this ethnicity. When people act on behalf of their ethnicity, it creates an ethnic group. When an individual has an ethnicity, but does not form a meaning of this ethnicity with others, no bond exists (Weber, 1968 [1921]). Therefore, no group exists and thus no conflict deriving from ethnic groups exists. A conflict may form, but it is not ethnic in nature. For instance, should the conflict in Darfur have been analysed through an ethnic studies lens? The economic roots and deprivation may have more causal forces than any ethnic claims (Willemsen, 2005). Darfur comprises several tribes and ethnic groups (Prunier, 2007). Is the conflict then ethnic in nature or is it rooted more in geopolitical, regional concerns by an authoritarian government that also comprises many ethnic groups (Cobham, 2005)? It must be noted that if a conflict’s main causes are not ethnic differences, it is not an ethnic conflict. As Michael Banton (2008, p. 1274) recognises, ‘Social relations have an ethnic dimension whenever one of the parties, consciously or unconsciously, regards any difference in ethnic origin (real or assumed) as a sign that the other person is to be treated differently’. Perhaps any group living in Darfur would be subjected to the same violence regardless of ethnicity if the same environmental concerns and regime elements were involved.

**Having ethnic traits does not make an ethnic group**

A vast literature has been devoted to explaining the ethnic group. Although there are some differences in definitions, at root most agree that an ethnic group comprises members with a common ethnicity. The first modern conceptualisation of an ethnic group is given by Max Weber. He writes that ethnic groups are ‘those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type, of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration’ (Weber, 1968 [1921], p. 389). This is distinguished from ethnicity merely as a category in that members share a subjective belief in their commonality. Banton (2008, p. 1270) explains Weber’s meaning: ‘A category is objective, a set of ... persons possessing one or more common characteristics. A ... group ... is constituted by the subjective feeling of its members that they belong together’. Clifford Geertz (1963) argues that assumed blood ties, skin colour, language, region, religion and custom comprise the ethnic group. Raymond Taras and Rajat Ganguly (2002) believe that an ethnic group has individuals with a common culture, religion, history, ancestry and racial similarity. What these definitions have
in common is that ethnic groups have an understanding of group distinctions. These distinctions and the recognition of commonalities between members are what distinguish an ethnic group from ethnicity as an ordering principle.

Many scholars, however, do not differentiate properly between ethnicity and the ethnic group. A more rigorous description is necessary to make the distinction. An ethnic group is distinguished from ethnicity by group members who are conscious of their belonging with others (Smith, 1979, p. 27). As Jenkins (2006, p. 391) writes, ‘groups are constituted in and by their “groupness”’. Or as Horowitz (2000, p. 50) puts it, ‘It is not the attribute that makes the group, but the group and group differences that make the attribute important’. Without knowledge that a bond exists, no ethnic group exists. For instance, should the Kurds really be considered an ethnic group (McKiernan, 2006)? Does a solid bond truly exist, given the language barriers, geographical barriers and religious differences that comprise the group dynamics of the Kurds (McDowall, 2005)? Or are there differences in Kurdish identity depending upon which country they reside (Natali, 2005)? When studying ‘ethnic’ conflict, we are fooling ourselves if we study a group of individuals sharing an ethnic trait, if they do not consciously understand their bond. In these situations, perhaps other forces (e.g., elite entreprenureship, relative deprivation or pure mob politics) are at work. By focusing on what appears to be ethnic dimensions, we are missing the more causal factor.

Perhaps one of the most important ideas in the definition of an ethnic group is that classifying members based upon ethnicity helps distinguish one group from another (Eller, 1999). These distinctions help create identities that supply the impetus for collective action, which can lead to conflict. While members of ethnic groups understand that they share ethnic traits, this sharing does not, in and of itself, constitute an ethnic group identity. An ethnic group’s identity begins to form when members of the group define their existence, and apply meaning to this existence, based upon their ethnic group criteria.

Identity as an indicator of ethnic group conflict

Ethnic group identity is imagined, not imaginary. Once imagined, it becomes real. It is an entity to which members of ethnic communities attach their existential security. Scholars define identity in countless ways, but what is most important is that members of an ethnic group see each other as similar. Some understanding of individual existential security is based on the idea of the ethnic group: ‘I exist only in relation to the group’. This thinking is what leads to deadly ethnic violence and thus must be taken seriously.

For a group to have an ethnic group identity, members must realise that they share an identity with other members of their group, recognising that this identity is an exclusive, unique entity. People who have different group characteristics are seen as separate entities. Within this framework, ethnic identity is the psychological attachment to an ethnic group (Cheung, 1993). Ethnic group identity can then be defined as the feeling or meaning of ethnic group membership. It is the emotional attachment to the characteristics of ethnicity or the ‘internalization of the meaning and implications of one’s group membership’ (Phinney, 2005, p. 188). As does Ernest
Gellner (1983), I emphasise that individuals must recognise the process of sharing meanings to form an ethnic group identity. Without understanding that they share meanings, an identity does not exist. Thus what makes an identity is understanding that they share the same elements that comprise that identity and they define their existence based upon this.

Many authors argue that having an ethnic group identity is equivalent to each member believing that the entire ethnic group is an extended form of kinship (Isaacs, 1975; Smith, 1999). It must be noted, however, that a person does not necessarily share a specific ethnic identity with others in the same ethnic group. One can have the ascribed characteristics of an ethnic group, such as piercings, without sharing the sentimental ‘sameness’ of being a member of that ethnic group (Eller, 1999).

A proper understanding of this distinction is essential to studying ethnic conflict. For example, African-Americans may share an ethnicity (common ethnic traits), but not an intimate attachment based on ethnic ties (same ancestral homeland, specific language, specific religion, specific historical memories, etc.). Therefore they qualify as an ethnic category rather than as an ethnic group. The same can be said of Anglo-Americans and other individuals who share physical traits, but not psychological and emotional attachments. If no ethnic group identity exists, there can be no ethnic group conflict. Therefore, the exact form of conflict illustrated by violence must be identified. This is a crucial primary step for developing successful conflict management and settlement scenarios. If we approach all conflicts involving ethnic groups as ethnic conflicts, the actual causes may be overlooked. As a result, proposed solutions may intensify rather than quell the dilemma.

Conclusions and implications

For summation purposes, it is useful to conceptualise clearly this article’s three main terms: ethnicity, the ethnic group and ethnic group identity. Ethnicity refers to an ordering principle that sorts people into ascribed categories. It is a label for people who have similar traits differentiated from others not sharing those traits. An ethnic group is a group of individuals sharing ethnic markers who recognise these markers among fellow group members. In-group recognition of shared markers is what constitutes an ethnic group. Ethnic group identity is defining one’s existence as directly related to sharing these ethnic group markers. One’s existence is experienced through one’s ethnic group.

For an ethnic conflict to exist, conflict must occur between two or more groups that not only have distinct ethnic characteristics, but whose members also share in that group’s ethnic identity. Two groups with differing ethnic traits can be at war with one another without that war being about ethnicity. If at least one group does not believe the conflict is about differences in ethnic dimensions, and if there are no distinct ethnic identities, it is not an ethnic conflict. Instead, it is a conflict over diverse issues, waged between groups that happen to have different ethnic traits. One might consider the Norwegians and British in the Second World War. This conflict was triggered by Nazi Germany’s attempt to gain Norway, which prompted
a British counter-attack. The conflict involved what some scholars would call three
different ‘ethnicities’ but was of course not ethnic in nature. Contemporary conflicts
should be looked upon with the same care. If we treat the conflict as being caused
by ethnicity, we may miss the opportunity to address the crisis by determining its
actual causes. Conflict may be about security concerning individuals with ethnic
similarities, but it may not be about individual existential security defined in ethnic
terms. These are two separate creatures.

For an ethnic conflict to exist, groups fighting the conflict must be conscious of their
‘we-ness’ juxtaposed with their enemy – the ‘other’. Identity is ‘the vehicle through
which individuals understand and act upon their environments’ (Elbedour, Bastien
and Center, 1997, p. 218). This compels the group’s members to act for its common
good rather than their own divergent self-interests. Belonging to something larger
than one’s self presents the opportunity for an individual to increase one’s self-
esteeem (Isaacs, 1975). It also provides individuals with a sense that their existence
will live on through their ethnic group.

Milton Esman (2004, p. 7) writes that ethnic solidarity ‘enables the mortal indi-
vidual to enhance his precarious self-esteem by identifying with a great and mean-
ingful tradition that will endure into the future’. In this sense, ethnic identity is
important because it provides the remote catalyst for collective action or ethnic
mobilisation. Identity is the engine that members use to demand their rights in
conflict scenarios. It is a bond to one’s ethnic group that excites people to act (Harff
and Gurr, 2004). Stronger ties increase the potential for mobilisation. More impor-
tantly, stronger ethnic ties could strengthen the intensity and types of violence
combatants are willing to use in conflict.

Most important to policy implications is being able to determine if a group actually
has an ethnic group identity. If we can single out those groups with strong identi-
ties, it will be possible to isolate the factors that may cause ethnic tensions, and
perhaps policymakers can mitigate conflicts before they begin. Further, if we can
find a way accurately to measure ethnic group identity, as opposed to individual
indicators of ethnicity, practitioners can determine whether a conflict is truly ethnic
in nature, or if ethnicity is a scapegoat in a much larger problem, such as a group
security dilemma or elite competition. It bears repeating that the most important
characteristic of an ethnic group is that all members recognise that they are tied to
others within the group and that they are different from others. This realisation of
sameness, and the catalyst it provides, is the basis of an ethnic group identity, by
which one determines ‘self-ness’. This self-ness should receive more focus from
ethnic scholars, for when it does exist in conflict scenarios, ethnic atrocities are
likely. Perhaps through more rigorous investigations into ethnic studies and by
more readily incorporating sociological and anthropological literature into our own,
political scientists can understand and prevent perceived ontological threats to
group existential security.

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