Foreword

Whether it is Sunni and Shia, Israelis and Palestinians, Sinhalese and Tamil or the conflicts in Chechnya, Rwanda, or Northern Ireland these clashes are the results of a combustible mixture of ethnicity and politics. Interestingly, conflicts are rarely about ethnicity itself or religion but ethnicity and religion can be highly implicated. In fact, as soon as ethnicity enters into a conflict it ignites political tensions and increases possibilities for violence, genocide, terrorism, and ethnic cleansing. A rational and manageable problem can quickly become the subject of violence and human rights violations if the power of ethnic group identity is introduced. But curiously, the study of ethnopolitical conflict is wrestling with the paradox that it has, on the one hand, been the subject of tremendous research yet we seem to make little progress. Violence and tensions continue to unfold as groups retreat into polarized ethnic enclaves. This book is a strong step in the direction of untangling this dilemma. It covers a wide range of theories, best practices, contexts, and cultures with an eye toward closing up differences.

The cause of ethnic conflict is always a difficult question with answers ranging from the macro political level of the polity to the micro relationship level between participants in conflict. And sometimes conflicts are clearly over the distribution of natural resources and access to economic advantages. But other times conflicts occur because of cultural or what Samuel Huntington called civilizational differences. Huntington, in The Clash of Civilizations and the Making of World Order published in 1996 contended that culture was so important that future political organizations would be primarily based on them.

The chapters that compose this volume about exhaust the spectrum of issues surrounding ethnopolitical conflicts which are ongoing states of hostility and opposition between two or more groups where ethnicity is foregrounded. Ethnopolitical conflict is not just about ethnic groups but the entire field of intergroup conflict where the interactions and relationships between group members are based on group-level images and stereotypes of the “other” fashioned as a result of the conflict. Common lines of research – and most all of them are represented here – includes causes and consequences of conflict, macro and micro perspectives, psychological consequences of ethnic identities, media accounts, communicative contact in the form of dialogue and deliberation, hate speech, conflict transformation, as well as power sharing models of governance. Moreover, this volume represents a nice articulation between macro and micro levels of interaction. Ethnopolitically divided groups oppose each other on both the interpersonal and group level. They represent classic intergroup conflict but opposing interests are interpersonal as well. It is fitting that analyses of these conflicts view micro interaction experiences (face-to-face interaction in
real-time) as the foundation for social level categories such as gender bias, group stereotypes, and other cultural generalities. Every day communication experiences accumulate to create perceptual categories and these in turn find their way back into interpersonal relationships. This recursive relationship maximizes the possibilities for both understanding ethnopolitical groups and transforming them.

Digital communication (new media) is more central to our daily lives than ever and has transformed patterns of contact and information flow. Communities and groups are increasingly dependent on networked communication and the new forms of relationships and contact that they allow. The “New Media Impacts” section is an insightful treatment of how media are stimulating change and shaping the information about various conflicts. As several authors point out the changing media environment is affecting how ethnic groups in conflict view the rest of the world and how they are seeing themselves. Blogs, cell phones, and text messaging are used to enhance the status of women, encourage new development, stimulate progress, and democratize. Still, new media are not magical. They cannot bring about change by themselves but they are valuable tools in the hands of the committed. The traditional structures of information are changing. In the past news and cultural information was scarce and controlled by very few sources. Governments and members of ethnic groups had few options because it was easy for governments and elites to exercise control over the nature, structure, accuracy, and availability of information. But this volume is testimony to the changes that have taken place.

Even perceptive theorists fail to fully grasp that ethnopolitical conflicts are mediated and essentially “vetted” by forms of communication and new technology. Political theorists, conflict resolution specialists, and international relations experts have continued to let the difficulties of ethnopolitical conflicts elude their grasp. And with dramatic changes in political equality as well as economic hardships leaders and group activists turn to ethnicity as an answer to their search for explanations. Ethnic conflicts have become a mainstay of the post-Cold War era. There are estimated to be over 200 politically active ethnic conflicts in almost 100 countries in the world which results in violence, food shortages, millions of refugees, as well as untold pain and suffering. The ability of mediated forms of communication and new techniques of contact to define conflicts, and then redefine them, has been essentially overlooked. Certainly, ethnopolitical conflicts involve numerous structural causes such as economic, social and political issues all of which politicize ethnic consciousness. But these structural factors do not have objective consequences. They are triggered and defined in part by mediated presentations that often produce the ethnopolitical conflicts we are examining.

The chapters that follow represent a rich sampling of communication research and the growing body of knowledge about media in non-Western societies, many of which are struggling with cultural contention in emerging democracies. The chapters at various points pose theoretical lenses that frame the manner in which conflict and culture interact. More specifically, the reader is treated to numerous examples of the interplay between communication and social processes related to ethnopolitical conflicts. These include the complementary relationship between powerful media and local wisdom, transborder communication, cultural discourse, concepts of justice, digitalized hate, and various media-cultural intersections. This volume offers an overview of the creative application of conflict theory with media theory each informed by experienced theoreticians and practitioners. The book is a debate about how to understand ethnic conflict, mediate and reconcile differences, and recognize the challenges posed to peace and security. It is a hopeful collection of chapters that enthusiastically captures our willingness
and capacity to continue struggling with complex differences that must be integrated both culturally and politically. In contrast with sweeping conclusions about patterns and policies of ethnic conflict, Gibson and Lando have stitched together a volume that documents the inescapable complementarity of deep cultural meaning and communication. It draws on a wide range of disciplines and uses carefully crafted analyses to navigate the terrain between communication and ethnopolitical conflict. I think the book will stand as a thoughtful and respected contribution to the literature on both communication and ethnopolitical conflict.

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