

Psychocultural Interpretations and Dramas: Identity Dynamics in Ethnic Conflict

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Ethnic identity connects individuals through perceived common past experiences and expectations of shared future ones. Identity is concerned with group judgments and judgments about groups and their motives. This article explores identity through the case of Loyal Order Protestant parades in Northern Ireland and the concepts of psychocultural interpretations (shared, deeply held worldviews found in group narratives) and psychocultural dramas (conflicts over competing, and apparently irresolvable, claims that engage the central elements of a group's historical experience). Psychocultural dramas are polarizing events whose manifest content involves non-negotiable cultural claims, threats, and/or rights that become important because of their connections to core metaphors and group narratives that embody a group's identity. In ethnic conflicts, psychocultural dramas arise over competing claims that evoke deeply rooted dimensions of the conflict which cannot be settled by reference to more general rules or higher authority. Psychocultural dramas are tools of analysis for understanding the centrality of cultural identity and ritual in ethnic conflict and for the redefinition of such conflicts in ways that increase the chances for managing them constructively. Examining the psychocultural dramas surrounding parades disputes in Northern Ireland suggests why and how some conflicts are more amenable to constructive outcomes than others.

KEY WORDS: psychocultural interpretation, psychocultural drama, identity, ritual, narrative, ethnic conflict.

Throughout the “marching season” in Northern Ireland, Protestant men in dark suits and bowler hats assemble at local lodges, attend church services, and hold parades celebrating past victories, such as the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 (when William of Orange's Protestant forces defeated the army of Catholic King James II), and commemorating losses, such as the deaths of many soldiers at the Battle of the Somme during the First World War. Protestant accounts of these parades

emphasize the solemn, religious nature of the parades and the occasions they mark (Lucy & McClure, 1997). Banners celebrate key events in Protestant history, especially those of the Williamite period, and emphasize important religious themes, symbols, and persons. Bands playing familiar music accompany the marchers, and important politicians may address the crowd (Bryan, 1997; Jarman, 1997). Catholic accounts, in contrast, express resentment because of the narrow sectarian nature of these same events and what they see as their stress on Protestant triumphalism and domination, the aggressive music of the “blood and thunder” bands (often clad in paramilitary symbols), and the anti-Catholic lyrics of many of the songs.

Jarman (1997, p. 119) reports that as of 1995, there were 3,500 parades each year in Northern Ireland, a region with a population of 1.5 million. The vast majority are exclusively Protestant (74%) or Catholic (9%) events that mark, celebrate, or commemorate events of significance to each community.¹ Much less common are parades that bring members of the two communities together around a shared experience or underscore the common fate of the region’s population. Parades are typically celebrations of ingroup solidarity and are perceived as statements about domination and resistance (Bryan, 1997; Jarman, 1997).

Parades offer occasions where political and cultural differences are emphasized and the tensions and anger produced mobilize loyalties along sectarian lines. As a result, any parade in Northern Ireland can easily become an emotionally charged, sectarian political expression. Although the vast majority of parades each year take place without incident, there are about 60 parades that are considered contentious. Particularly when Protestant parades are routed through Catholic working-class neighborhoods, they are often strongly resented by local residents, while Protestants contend that restrictions on parading along “traditional” routes are an infringement of their religious and political rights. In recent years there have been confrontations with police, and violence and death were associated with parades in South Belfast and Portadown. To address such contentious parades in 1997, the government appointed a Parades Commission charged with making decisions about the routing, structure, and organization of potentially problematic parades.²

Conflicts about parades in Northern Ireland are not fundamentally about freedom of speech or religion or protection from intimidation, but about the threatened identities of people in the region: “Put simply, the parades issue goes to the heart of the deeply fractured society that, sadly, Northern Ireland represents” (North, 1997, p. 41). I argue that because identity issues are at the core of the larger conflict—here as elsewhere—ethnic conflict is often bitter and prolonged. Under-

¹ The remaining 617 parades are not classified as either loyalist or nationalist; they include such events as May Day parades held by trade unions and Salvation Army parades (Jarman, 1997, pp. 118–120).

² The Loyal Orders, which sponsor the parades, have been hostile to the Parades Commission, and no members of any of the Loyal Orders have agreed to serve on it to date.

standing the importance of identity in such ethnic conflicts draws attention to what social identity means to both ingroups and outgroups, how it is symbolized and communicated, and how it affects political behavior and beliefs (Ross, 1997a). Focusing on identity is especially useful in explaining the intensity of ethnic conflict and the circumstances in which identity's content and salience may resist or yield to change (Ross, 1993a, 1997a).

My attention to identity in ethnic conflict is rooted in the failure of interest theories (from neo-Marxist to rational choice) to adequately account for ethnic conflict, especially its intensity (e.g., Banton, 1983; Hardin, 1995). Whereas interest theories see shared identity as arising from common interests, identity theories stress that shared identity defines and creates the perception of the interests over which ethnic conflicts are fought. Although I emphasize identity dynamics in this article, I do not claim that only identities matter in ethnic conflict; interests count too, and the interrelationship of identity and interests is complex and not always appreciated.

Central to my analysis of identity and ethnic conflict are psychocultural interpretations and psychocultural dramas. *Psychocultural interpretations* are the shared, deeply rooted worldviews that help groups make sense of daily life and provide psychologically meaningful accounts of a group's relationship with other groups, their actions and motives (Ross, 1995). They are at the core of shared systems of meaning and identity that define cultural communities (Ross, 1997a), and are revealed in a group's narratives recounting their origin, history, and conflicts with outsiders, as well as in the community's symbolic and ritual behaviors. Understanding a group's psychocultural interpretations (or worldviews) analytically means making sense of their origin, intensity, and significance for political action. Although it is often easy to dismiss ingroup explanations as incorrect or irrational and therefore irrelevant "just-so" stories, to do so would be as foolish as for a psychoanalyst to tell a patient he or she had just recounted a stupid dream.

Psychocultural dramas are conflicts between groups over competing, and apparently irresolvable, claims that engage the central elements of each group's historical experience and identity and invoke suspicions and fears of the opponent. Psychocultural dramas are polarizing events about non-negotiable cultural claims, threats, and/or rights that become important because of their connections to group narratives and core metaphors central to a group's identity. My development of the concept of psychocultural drama builds on Victor Turner's (1957) concept of the social drama. The social dramas Turner analyzes are conflicts that are not ever fully resolved, but they are settled for a time when the conflict is redefined away from incompatible principles to the symbolic and ritual domain, where disputants can emphasize shared concerns and superordinate goals. I suggest that the psychocultural drama is an excellent tool for the analysis of identity in ethnic conflict and for understanding new possibilities for managing ethnic conflicts constructively. Psychocultural dramas, such as the conflict over parades in Northern Ireland, are found in all long-term ethnic conflicts. By examining their development, escalation, and

termination (but not necessarily successful resolution), we can better appreciate the central role of culture and identity in ethnic conflict.

Identity in Ethnic Conflict

Ethnic identity connects individuals through perceived common past experiences and expectations of shared future ones. It entails a sense of common fate, including expectations of common treatment, joint fears of survival/extinction, and beliefs about group worth, dignity, and recognition. Identity involves group judgments and judgments about groups and their motives. For example, Horowitz (1985, pp. 147–192) discusses the power of assigning the labels “backward” and “advanced” to ethnic groups in colonial and post-colonial settings, and the claims of entitlement that groups may make as a consequence of such a designation.

Social identity development. Social identity begins to develop at the earliest stages of the life cycle, and its intensity is crucial to explaining why people are willing to make the greatest personal sacrifices in its name (Stern, 1995). People with the same identity share targets of externalization—common enemies—which reinforces a shared view of a world filled with enemies and allies (Volkan, 1988). High emotional salience is attached to group differences that are emphasized through symbolic and ritual behaviors binding individuals to their own groups. As Volkan (1990) writes:

The psychoanalytic view indicates that ethnicity or nationality originates much as other emotional phenomena do in clans or tribes. The sense of self is intertwined at a primitive level with the identity of the group. Membership in these groups is not like that in a club or professional organization, since it is tinged with raw and primitive affects pertaining to one’s sense of self and others and to their externalization and projections. (p. 36)

Humans clearly have an evolved predisposition for sociality and a well-developed capacity to form cohesive social groups (Howell & Willis, 1989), and ingroup identity provides the basis for a fundamental paradox of human existence. It facilitates both physical and emotional survival within groups; at the same time, strong ingroup solidarity can promote outgroup competition and conflict, although we are unclear about exactly how the two dynamics are related (LeVine & Campbell, 1972).³

Modern psychoanalytic writing is particularly helpful for understanding identity development and the relationship between individual and ethnic identity (Ross,

³ Campbell (1975) proposed that cultural institutions such as religion have been important in extending cooperative behavior beyond small related kin groups to far larger social aggregates. One could compile a long list of cultural practices that have effectively built upon this propensity to form groups even among individuals who have no prior first-hand knowledge of each other.

1995). Unlike older, drive-based theories of psychodynamic functioning, contemporary object relations theory, with its emphasis on linking a person's inner and outer worlds, focuses on the social development of attachment (Bowlby, 1969; Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). This work sees early social relationships as providing a template for ones that develop later in life, and it is especially concerned with the parts of the outer world brought inside and with inner parts projected outward (Stern, 1985; Volkan, 1988). Normal development, facilitated by what Winnicott (1965) calls the good-enough mother, encourages both the attachment of the individual to others and separation-individuation as a person builds a sense of self connected to a progressively wider circle of attachment (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975).

Winnicott (1958) describes the importance of transitional objects—teddy bears, soft towels, and other treasured objects—that link a child's inner and outer worlds and are infused with high emotional significance. It is easy to extend this linkage process to social and cultural objects—significant symbols and rituals that are first encountered in safe, within-group contexts (often in childhood), revisited in adolescence when peer groups and wider social attachments are especially salient emotionally, and embedded in daily practices and their culturally specific sights, smells, and sounds.

Understanding ethnic identity is also complicated by the fact that human groups range widely in form and content, and that any one person has multiple identities whose salience varies across situations. Identity involves the capacity to distinguish in specific settings between people who are like oneself and those who are different, and depending on the context the same people may be variously classified as alike or different. To analyze identity, we need to examine what it is that people believe they have in common, and to consider how a sense of shared fate develops and is reinforced within a group.

Psychocultural interpretations are critical to this dynamic. Several factors shape the interpretive process. One is the human predisposition to make sense of experience. This capacity is at the core of our ability to learn and to act upon our environment. Yet the same factors that push actors to make sense of a situation also lead to cognitive and perceptual distortion in identity conflicts, because the desire for certainty often is greater than the capacity for accuracy. Not only are disputants likely to make systematic errors in the "facts" underlying interpretations, but homogeneous social settings and the presence of cultural amplifiers reinforce these distortions (Mack, 1983). What is most crucial, however, about subjective interpretations of a conflict is the compelling, coherent account they offer to the parties in linking discrete events to general understandings. Central to such interpretations is the attribution of motives to parties (Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Pruitt & Rubin, 1985, p. 103). Once identified, the existence of such motives seemingly makes it easy to "predict" another's future actions and, through one's own behavior, to turn such predictions into self-fulfilling prophecies.

A second factor that makes the interpretive process possible is the ambiguity and complexity of the situation in most ethnic conflicts. Although participants in any dispute can often tell someone “just what the conflict is about,” this precision is usually illusory (Roy, 1994). Opposing parties operate from very different frames of reference; as a result, they don’t agree on what a conflict is about, when it started, or who they consider to be involved. External events can be interpreted in a number of ways; as a result, groups turn to internal frameworks and perceptions, which then shape subsequent behavior. This, of course, is what makes ethnic conflict so difficult to contain and manage. Ambiguous events are easily selectively interpreted as confirming evidence for preexisting beliefs. Furthermore, because many disputes involve parties with a long history of conflict, older grievances can easily be appended to newer ones as political conditions warrant. For all of these reasons, it is appropriate to suggest that, rather than thinking about particular objective events that cause conflicts to escalate, we ought to be thinking about the *interpretations* of such events that are associated with escalation and those that are not.

A striking feature of many identity-based ethnic conflicts is the parties’ emotional investment in what outsiders may view as unimportant matters. The fact is, however, that any matter invested with emotional significance is no longer trivial, and intransigent intergroup disputes quickly become characterized by perceived threats to group self-esteem and legitimation (Ross, 1995). The dynamic is one in which the parties feeling threatened place identity issues at the core of their concerns (Northrup, 1989). Such emotion-laden conflicts can be especially difficult to settle. When each side feels the same intense emotions, it may be difficult to recognize what is, in fact, shared. For example, although both Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland each see themselves as a threatened minority, each has trouble acknowledging the other side’s view. One party’s own emotional concerns make it very difficult to accept another’s account, especially when their own action may be the root cause of an adversary’s feelings and behavior.

Identity is linked to shared images of the world. Group members often go through common developmental experiences, including shared events, that are incorporated into one’s own personal identity (Ross, 1995, pp. 526–531). Anderson (1991) wrote of imagined communities, which link personal and collective identities. The process of within-group identity formation overemphasizes what it is that group members actually share, giving greater emotional weight to the common elements, reinforcing them with an ideology of linked fate, and frequently overestimating within-group uniformity (Turner, 1988). There is also a shared, and usually exaggerated, conception of the differences between one’s group and outsiders. The strong, and opposing, identities involved in intense conflicts emphasize the homogeneity of each party, sometimes using what are small objective differences to mark large social distinctions (Volkan, 1988). Outsiders then can serve as objects for externalization, displacement, and projection of intense negative

feelings while dissenting perspectives present inside the group are denied (Fornari, 1975; Volkan, 1988).

Identities and interests as motives for action. In examining the role of identity in ethnic conflict, it is important to acknowledge that interests also drive conflict in general and ethnic conflict in particular (Ross, 1993a). If interests and identities are two imperatives that drive ethnic conflict, then each can provide motives for political organization and action. At first glance, interests seem more straightforward motives, are easy to articulate as political claims, and provide a basis for group (or individual) goals. Interests are generally quite concrete, and given the pervasive use of economic metaphors in our culture, it would seem reasonable to say that people are pursuing, or are motivated by, their own interests. Indeed, public discourse in most democracies legitimizes interest-based claims, such as “We are seeking more and better jobs for our people.” However, even when interests are presented as objective, they have important subjective dimensions as well. For example, when groups make claims concerning such things as jobs, seats on government boards, or positions in universities, they are also invoking implicit notions of justice derived from an assessment of what they feel entitled to receive. Specific entitlement demands—involving, for example, high-level political positions or the public display of flags or street signs—are often “tests” to gauge how a political system views a group, and any analysis that ignores the intense subjective elements of such demands is going to be incomplete.

Identity is a more complicated basis for political claims. The members of a group, for example, may not be fully aware of the group’s identity concerns. Often operating at a subconscious level, perceived threats and deeply rooted fears can be difficult to talk about or to specify. As a result, groups frequently assert identity claims in strident and hard-to-hear ways, emphasizing firm positions, when in fact the deeper underlying needs remain diffuse and implicit. When identity-based demands do become explicit, however, their emotional meaning can cause them to be stated in all-or-nothing, moralistic terms, which makes them difficult to address through the give-and-take of everyday political life.

Interests and identities are often quite interconnected. The distinction between the two is analytic, but people caught up in conflicts intuitively understand their empirical linkage. For example, it is easy to see how the achievement of certain interest goals, such as gaining a political office or improved job opportunities, can address a group’s identity and recognition concerns at the same time. To the extent that interest claims are “tests” of a group’s acceptance as a legitimate political player, achievement of the interest claims also addresses concerns about identity. However, there are times when a group may be ready to drop or alter an interest claim if identity needs can be met in another manner. Similarly, when identity-based fears of exclusion diminish, groups may alter the kinds of interest claims they make. Understanding intense ethnic conflict as involving both interests and identities thus increases not only our analytical understanding but also our options for constructive conflict management (Ross, 1993a, 1993b).

Psychocultural Interpretations and Psychocultural Dramas as Analytic Tools

Psychocultural Interpretations

Psychocultural interpretations are found in many forms, including formal written materials, historical documents, public discourse, government records, law cases, videos, plays, music, systematic observations, and survey data. In addition, data on psychocultural interpretations are available in ethnographic field research, in-depth interviews and life histories, structured interviews, extended case analysis of what legal anthropologists call trouble cases, popular culture, and public and semi-public myths and rituals.

Survey data. Good survey data are a valuable tool in the analysis of ethnic conflict. Because it is so easy in public discourse to emphasize polarizing identity labels and to adopt the language of the most strident political actors, data from surveys that offer respondents more nuanced options can be more complex and preferences less polarized than is often thought. Such data can also provide important evidence at odds with the claims of political leaders and groups.

In Northern Ireland, survey data have consistently offered important insights into public understanding of the conflict. For example, they show that while Catholics in the North prefer a united Ireland, many have also been consistently willing to accept solutions short of reunification, provided they gain a real political voice and significant protection for minority rights. Surveys have also shown the complexity of Protestant identity, revealing great diversity in self-identification. At various times and in different proportions, Protestants choose the labels British, Northern Irish, Anglo-Irish, “sometimes British and sometimes Irish,” and Irish (Rose, 1971; Ruane & Todd, 1996, pp. 57–60; Whyte, 1990, pp. 65–71).

In the Middle East, survey data reveal important features of Israeli and Palestinian identity. They show that although there is greater Palestinian acceptance of the state of Israel—even before the Oslo Accords in 1993—than is often believed (Smootha, 1997), the Arabs who are residents and citizens of Israel prefer to be called “Palestinians in Israel” or “Palestinian Arabs” rather than Israeli Arabs, the term the Israeli government uses most often (Rouhana, 1997).⁴ Surveys also show that among Jews in Israel, self-designation as religious or secular is highly correlated with a large number of political attitudes concerning the organization and structure of the state, its appropriate size, access to state resources, and citizenship (Arian & Shamir, 1995; Shamir & Arian, 1999).

Survey data can provide a good look at the distribution of opinions in a group and can reveal important sources of variation. What they are less able to offer are

⁴ It should also be recognized that question wording and contextual factors (such as recent political developments) affect responses to this question, and the responses show a good deal of variation among Palestinians (Rouhana, 1997; see also Smootha, 1989).

insights about the broader context in which particular dimensions of identity are embedded, or why it is that specific identities are so salient. To address these issues, we can use group narratives and psychocultural dramas to supplement the broad-based, but thin, data good surveys provide.

Group narratives. How do individuals and groups explain a conflict to themselves and to outsiders? Listening to and analyzing the narratives shared by activists and their communities can reveal a great deal about the deep fears and threats to identity that drive ethnic conflict. Particularly important are the implicit and explicit assumptions about motives—one's own and those of others—that these stories contain.

Consider this brief excerpt from a longer conversation I had with Denis Watson, the grand marshal of the Orange Order in County Armagh and a newly elected Protestant Unionist member of the Northern Ireland Assembly in October 1998. We were discussing the stand-off in Portadown over the Parades Commission's refusal the previous July to permit the Orange Order to march from Drumcree Church to their lodge headquarters through a Catholic neighborhood (other routes were available but were quickly dismissed as unacceptable and nontraditional by the local lodge). I asked Watson why the conflict in Drumcree has been so bitter and hard to resolve. He replied by reminding me that the area was the site of a Catholic massacre of Protestants . . . in 1641. Clearly this image frames the recent conflict in a broad historical context, conveying the Protestant view of what Catholics will do to Protestants given the chance, and invoking the siege metaphor, which emphasizes Protestant vigilance and self-protection as necessary to defend their rights and interests (Buckley & Kenney, 1995).

Narratives are accounts groups develop to address both the substantive and emotional levels of a conflict. Important themes in a group's narratives link past experiences to strong emotions, providing support for certain courses of action (Roy, 1994; Scott, 1985). In Northern Ireland, Protestant narratives, for example, continue to invoke the theme of siege and the value of collective resistance (Buckley & Kenney, 1995, pp. 41–57) and the idea of a sacred covenant rooted in the Exodus story (Akenson, 1992). Serbian narratives are full of images of marauding Turks (Volkan, 1997, pp. 50–80), and Jewish narratives contain themes of the destruction of the Second Temple and the Holocaust. All powerful narratives build on collective memories of what are believed to be actual events, but their significance lies in the way the elements are put together into authoritative accounts that trigger strong emotional responses.

Culturally defined narratives express group identity for the parties locked in struggle as they recount past encounters, present difficulties, and future aspirations (Ross, 1997a, 1997b). Obviously, there can be a huge gap between the elements and structure in actors' narratives and how a researcher understands political action, just as there is a great difference between the content of a patient's dreams and the psychoanalyst's interpretation of their structure and significance. Bridging this gap

requires an understanding of the culture sufficient to build interpretations that both make sense to cultural insiders and can be appreciated by outsiders.

Narratives are valuable for showing how participants think about and characterize a conflict. As we listen to them, it is important to consider the differences in the stories each community uses to explain what is apparently the same conflict without necessarily contradicting each other directly. In these “separate histories,” each side selects key events that come to have central meaning for their own community. For example, in Northern Ireland, Protestants find great meaning in the story of William of Orange and the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, whereas Catholic accounts say little about King Billy or the battle. In contrast, Catholic Nationalists emphasize the meaning of the 1916 Easter Uprising, which for Protestants is far less significant than their sacred pact committing themselves to resist Irish self-rule 4 years earlier. Even when an event enters into both sides’ narratives, such as the hunger strikes of Republican prisoners in 1980–1981, the metaphors and meanings associated with the event can be so different that a person hearing the two narratives may not immediately realize that they concern the same event.⁵

Narratives about a longstanding conflict contain the culturally rooted aspirations, challenges, and deepest fears of ethnic communities. One particularly poignant kind of narrative is what Volkan calls a “chosen trauma,” referring to specific experiences that symbolize a group’s deepest threats and fears through feelings of helplessness and victimization (Volkan, 1988, 1997). He provides many examples of such events, including the Turkish slaughter of Armenians, the Nazi Holocaust, the experience of slavery and segregation for African Americans, and the Serbian defeat at Kosovo by the Turks in 1389 (Volkan, 1997). When group members feel too humiliated, angry, or helpless to mourn the losses suffered in the trauma, Volkan argues that the group then incorporates the emotional meaning of the traumatic event into its identity and passes on the emotional and symbolic meaning from generation to generation.⁶

In escalating intergroup conflicts, key metaphors, such as the chosen traumas, serve both as a rallying point and as a way to make sense of events that evoke deep fears and threats to existence (Horowitz, 1985; Kelman, 1987). Only when the deep-seated threats these stories represent are addressed is a community able to begin to imagine a more peaceful future with its enemies.

⁵ Jewish and Palestinian accounts of events in the 20th century, such as 1948, are similarly different in both content and affect.

⁶ The flip side is the chosen glory in which a group perceives triumph over the enemy; this is seen clearly in the annual Northern Irish Protestant celebration of the Battle of the Boyne on 12 July.

Psychocultural Dramas

Psychocultural dramas are intergroup conflicts over competing and apparently irresolvable claims that come to engage the central elements of each group's historical experience, contemporary identity, and suspicions and fears about an opponent. They are polarizing events whose manifest content involves non-negotiable cultural claims, threats, and/or rights that become important because of their connections to core metaphors and group narratives that embody a group's identity.

The manifest focus of a psychocultural drama can be over the allocation of material resources, or can involve differences about cultural questions such as language, religion, social practices, or music and popular culture. As the drama unfolds, the conflict becomes connected to a central element of a group's identity. Unless there are dispute resolution mechanisms (such as a judicial system, administrative process, or legislative process) that are recognized as legitimate by the parties, the scope and intensity of the conflict escalate and the initial conflict becomes a crisis.

The social dramas Turner (1957, pp. 89–90) describes occur within a society that shares key values when (a) competing principles, which groups or individuals in conflict invoke to support their positions but which do not take precedence over each other, lead to a serious breach in the social order; and (b) there is a common norm that each side contends the other has broken.⁷ The social dramas Turner presents, which arise from structural contradictions between Ndembu norms of inheritance and residence, result in marital and village instability and tension, which increase during contests for succession to village headmanship.

Turner (1957, pp. 91–92) defines four phases through which social dramas pass: breach of social relations, mounting crisis, redressive action, and reintegration or recognition of schism. As a social drama unfolds, tensions mount and the conflict escalates as each side works vigorously to strengthen its position and to draw in new allies. New issues are often interjected as social dramas develop, and in addition past events and feelings resurface. When it is possible to use jural mechanisms to resolve the crisis, the community may do so, but Turner emphasizes the importance of ritual mechanisms of redress, especially when jural mechanisms either do not exist or are inadequate because none of the competing principles is clearly more important than any of the others.

The Ndembu rituals Turner describes are responses to a high level of social tension and often focus on matters (such as fertility) that are ostensibly unrelated to the ongoing crisis. In addition, they bring in participants from neighboring communities who are related by principles such as cult membership or age. Mobilization of the wider community for the performance of reparative rituals

⁷ Turner also described social dramas involving individuals competing for a single position for which both are eligible, but they are not my focus here.

refocuses people's emotional energy and puts the original conflict in a context where disputants emphasize shared norms and goals, because ritual activity links the disputants through affiliations (such as ritual cults or age organizations) that cut across existing communities and lines of cleavage. As a result, it is not so much that the original conflict is resolved in any profound sense, because the competing norms are still present. Rather, either the emotional significance of differences diminishes sufficiently so that people find a solution they can accept and return to their daily routines in relative harmony, or there are outcomes such as the fission of a village into smaller ones.

In ethnic conflicts, psychocultural dramas arise over competing claims that evoke deeply rooted dimensions of the conflict and cannot be settled by reference to more general rules or higher authority. As a result, although psychocultural dramas have great political significance, they are not narrowly political events, particularly in their early stages. This is because the contending parties emphasize competing rights in such a way that negotiation, redefinition of goals, or compromise is not possible. For example, when a group believes it is fulfilling God's commands, compromising its goals and modifying behaviors becomes blasphemy. Turner observes that the intensity of social dramas can be diffused through the transformation of disputes over competing interests into ritual actions emphasizing what the parties share. Of course, this is difficult to achieve through political processes in cases where there has been prolonged ethnic conflict. The discussion on parades below suggests, however, that when it is possible for symbolic redefinition and political action to go hand-in-hand, constructive settlement of psychocultural dramas becomes possible even in bitter ethnic conflicts. What constructive conflict management involves is not the denial of the divergent narratives; rather, it involves redefining the substantive issues, such that the parties feel there is something they could talk about with an opponent (Kelman, 1992), and finding ways to reframe or redefine the symbolic and emotional aspects of the conflict.

Examples of psychocultural dramas I am investigating are disputes about such matters as Israel's opening of an archeological tunnel under the Moslem holy sites in Jerusalem; Muslim girls who wear head scarves in French schools; the use of English in public signs, businesses, and government in French Canada, and the rules about who can send their children to English-language schools there; the flying of the confederate flag over the South Carolina state capitol; and ethnically based land claims in Kenya's Rift Valley.⁸ In long-term ethnic conflicts such as

⁸ Although I focus on intergroup psychocultural dramas here, one can fruitfully apply the concept to differences between subgroups in a larger ethnic community, such as the conflict between secular and religious Jews in Israel over military service or the use of cars on the Sabbath.

those in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, or Sri Lanka, there are a number of psychocultural dramas that could be analyzed.⁹

Psychocultural dramas produce reactions that are emotionally powerful, clearly differentiate the parties in conflict, and contain key elements of the larger conflict in which they are embedded.¹⁰ In psychocultural dramas, identity is linked to a group's core symbols, although these symbols can take a variety of forms: historical narratives, key leaders, ritual actions, places, or objects. Their powerful emotional meaning merges time and space and stresses ingroup solidarity and outgroup hostility (Volkan, 1997).

Loyalist Parades in Northern Ireland as a Psychocultural Drama

Parades disputes in Northern Ireland are psychocultural dramas that begin with Catholic objections concerning some aspect of Loyal Order parades, such as their routes, size, or music.¹¹ A crisis begins when the authorities are asked to decide whether the parade can go forth. It escalates as each side makes its case to the public and mobilizes supporters. Appeals emphasize competing rights, and the conflict evokes powerful images of domination, resistance, historical suffering, and identity in each group's core narratives. In its first 3 years of existence, the Parades Commission has found that simple reference to a single higher principle or authority cannot provide an avenue for settlement of these conflicts—or even an agreed-upon framework for addressing them—because either these do not exist or their existence is not widely accepted.¹² Most psychocultural dramas arising from parades disputes do not effectively invoke redressive mechanisms and remain stuck in the crisis stage.

As an illustration, consider Portadown, a small town southwest of Belfast near where the Orange Order was founded. In 1985 and 1986 there were six major riots and many violent incidents associated with the Orange Order parades when the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) rerouted the July parades away from a narrow road through a Catholic nationalist working-class area (Bryan, 1997, pp. 374–375). Between 1995 and 2000 there has been a series of yearly psychocultural dramas surrounding the Portadown parade. In five of those years, first the RUC and later the Parades Commission prohibited the marchers from parading from Drumcree

⁹ In Northern Ireland one could look at the late 1960s civil rights marches, internment, Bloody Sunday, the Protestant general strike in 1974, and the 1980–1981 hunger strikes in these terms. In many ways, O'Malley (1990) analyzes the hunger strikes as a psychocultural drama without using the term.

¹⁰ Not all conflicts are psychocultural dramas. Hence, these three criteria exclude disputes that fail to mobilize intense feelings and those that do not divide a community on group lines.

¹¹ The Loyal Orders are Protestant organizations—the Orange, Purple, and Black orders and the Apprentice Boys of Derry.

¹² Using civil servants to resolve divisive values disputes is difficult even in a society with a strong tradition of legitimate authority. In Northern Ireland, this mechanism is especially problematic and fails to gain support from large segments of society.

Church outside the town through a Catholic neighborhood to return to their lodge hall. Escalation and expansion of the conflict took place each year as hard-line Orange Order members and their supporters burned businesses and cars, clashed with police, intimidated Catholics, committed murders, and since 1998 camped out on the church site, insisting they would leave only when they could complete the march. In 1999 and 2000, with the protest still continuing from 1998, the Parades Commission again banned the march and the security forces braced for violence, erecting both barbed-wire and steel-and-concrete barriers and flooding a local stream to create a moat. The Orangemen responded with a symbolic contingent of a handful of marchers who protested to the police verbally but turned back peacefully to avoid a confrontation. Despite numerous efforts by various third parties to mediate the conflict in Portadown, no settlement has been reached.

Parade conflicts become psychocultural dramas when each party's core narratives and the symbols associated with the parades invoke intense feelings, and each side respectively defends and attacks these symbols (North, 1997, pp. 41–52). As Bryan (1997) wrote, "Orange parades are ritual events and are cited by both those inside and outside the community as pivotal to local Protestant 'tradition,' defining the ethnic boundary between Protestant and Catholic communities" (p. 375). He added that "much of their power comes from their ability to give identity and historical meaning to the world" (p. 392). For Catholics too, Loyalist parades are associated with powerful (and in their case negative) symbols. As a result, confrontations are regarded in win-lose terms and a middle ground is hard to find.

In 1995 the psychocultural drama in Portadown began when the RUC's chief constable refused to allow the Orangemen to parade down the Garvaghy Road to their lodge after their service at Drumcree Church. The crisis mounted during 2 days of protests, and Protestants evoked images of earlier sieges they had endured; the police then reversed their decision at the last minute, removed the Catholic protesters installed on the route, and permitted the Orange parade—joined by prominent Protestant politicians, including current leader David Trimble and Ian Paisley—to take place. Again in 1996, the RUC first banned the Orangemen from marching on the Garvaghy Road but then reversed their decision after 5 days of protests and violence throughout the North. Next, the police ousted nationalist protesters critical of the reversal of the original decision. In 1997 the police and army secured the area to allow the parade to occur. These outcomes were hardly an effective resolution, however, and when in 1998 the Parades Commission refused to let the Orange Order march on the Garvaghy Road, thousands of Orangemen and their allies gathered in Drumcree, hoping that once again they could pressure a reversal of the original decision. This time, however, on the eve of the march, the house of a Protestant man and his Catholic wife (living elsewhere in the province) was firebombed, killing her three children. The fervor of the protesters then dissipated and the ban stayed in place, leaving a hard core of

protesters camped at Drumcree for months, unable to get permission to finish their march and unwilling to call off their protest.

These powerful psychocultural dramas gain the full attention of the region (and beyond) and evoke strong feelings from each community. They displace other concerns; in 1998 the parade conflicts clearly slowed down, and distracted from, efforts to implement the recently signed Good Friday agreement. In the psychocultural dramas arising from contentious Loyalist parades, the movement from crisis to redressive mechanisms is most often slow or ineffective and the crisis remains unresolved. However, it is possible to view the responses from both Protestants and Catholics to the death of the Quinn children and the powerful, common reactions to the large car bomb that exploded in the city of Omagh in August 1998 as a shared symbolic response that emphasized common values, especially the rejection of violence and a commitment to build a peaceful future. Were these responses effective as redressive mechanisms? Probably not by themselves, but they were not insignificant after the political agreement reached a few months earlier. It is reasonable to hypothesize that what the responses did was to isolate the perpetrators of violence on both sides more effectively than was possible in the past, and to underline values that had widespread cross-community support. Certainly in 1999 there were louder voices in the Protestant community calling for non-confrontation, including important church leaders insisting that Orangemen adhere to good-behavior pledges to attend church services. Protestant political leaders also realized that another violent confrontation would not serve their cause. Perhaps these played an important role in discouraging a violent confrontation at Drumcree in 1999 and 2000.

Interestingly, a quite different situation has evolved in Londonderry/Derry, the region's second largest city, where the psychocultural dramas arising from the parades' disputes during the same period have invoked more powerful redressive mechanisms that have led to much more constructive outcomes (Kelly & Nan, 1998). In 1995 the psychocultural drama in Derry began when, after the paramilitary cease-fires in 1994, the Apprentice Boys of Derry—whose marches marking the beginning and end of the city's siege in 1688–1689 dominate the annual parading calendar—petitioned to be allowed to parade the entire circumference of the city's walls, as they had been able to before 1970 when the British Army set up positions on the walls overlooking the Catholic Bogside neighborhood. The Apprentice Boys' request produced strong protests from the Bogside Residents Group (BRG) and the course of conflict could have resembled Portadown, but over the next few years multi-party negotiations and redefinition of the parade within the context of a broader cultural festival in Derry provided important redressive mechanisms.

In the days before the August 1995 parade, members of the BRG occupied sections of the walls. When negotiations proved unsuccessful, the RUC finally removed them by force and the Apprentice Boys paraded the full circuit of the walls. In addition, there were incidents during the parade in the afternoon (Kelly

& Nan, 1998, pp. 50–51). In 1996, after the Drumcree standoff in July, civic leaders and local MP John Hume arranged negotiations in which both the Apprentice Boys and the BRG took part. The sticking point was the BRG's insistence that any agreement concerning Derry also contain limits to parading in other nationalist areas of Northern Ireland. However, issues such as the time of the march on the walls, the number of marchers, who the marchers would be, bands to accompany the marchers, and the music they would play were discussed before the talks eventually collapsed. The government then banned any parading on the walls in August, although the march took place in other parts of the city. In October the Apprentice Boys marched the walls without incident (Kelly & Nan, 1998, pp. 55–56).

The following year, the Apprentice Boys refused to enter into direct negotiations with the BRG but did agree to participate in proximity talks in Derry City Hall. Once again the situation was complicated by events in Portadown, although cancellation of an Orange Order parade scheduled for Derry in July eased tensions considerably. Linkage to parades in other areas was still a sticking point, but the mayor, the head of the Chamber of Commerce, and a member of the Parades Commission proved to be effective mediators, and an agreement was eventually reached to permit the parade to take place without violence in 1997 and 1998. In 1999, relations in Derry were tense, a reflection of the uncertain outcome of the political negotiations over the implementation of the 1998 Good Friday agreement. The BRG demanded face-to-face talks with the Apprentice Boys and insisted that the negotiations include a discussion of feeder parades in other cities. When the indirect negotiations broke down, there was rioting and significant property damage in South Belfast and Derry. However, Derry Catholics were hardly united behind the rioters, and shortly after the August parade negotiations resumed, there was an agreement around the important Apprentice Boys' December march well before it was held.

The Catholic-dominated City Council was important in the process that led to changes in the structure of the celebration, including agreements regarding the time of day and the number of marchers on the city walls, the parade's organization and route, control over the bands that accompanied the march, and the musical selections they were to play. Certainly some of the changes resulted from each side acknowledging the other's most basic concerns, although there were pragmatic self-interests at work as well.

From the perspective of identity theory, an even more noteworthy point is that the agreement was, in part, made possible by the redefinition of the celebration as a broad, more inclusive cultural festival focusing on the city's history. Each year the festival, partially financed through municipal funds, has expanded to include an exhibition at City Hall, a talk by a Catholic historian, contests involving both Protestant and Catholic schoolchildren, a mini-bluegrass festival and a street fair. Although there are still plenty of tensions and unresolved issues around the Apprentice Boys' parades, the lines of cleavage in the city have been blurred, and

the deep threats to or attacks on group identity associated with the marches have diminished in many ways.

Psychocultural dramas reveal important fault lines in relations among ethnic groups. They identify points of emotional fissure in the relations between groups; they can reveal both the specific interests around which ethnic conflicts are waged and the deeper identity dynamics at work, which often make it so hard to find effective redressive mechanisms and to settle these conflicts constructively. Turner's idea that effective redress requires performance of public ritual is fully consistent with what psychoculturally oriented theorists such as Kelman, Montville, and Volkan propose. Ritual is significant because it emphasizes what groups (even those in conflict) share, and it provides reassurance that future relationships will be less threatening than past ones. To the extent that it can achieve this, ritual is an important mechanism for redefining ethnic conflict away from incompatible differences and threatened identities, and toward agreed-upon relations under which groups live together or recognize separation as the best solution.

Signed agreements between longstanding opponents, such as Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East, or whites and blacks in South Africa, are only one step in the peace process. Implementation of agreements forces us to consider how ritual and symbol are a significant part of peacemaking and peacebuilding. An important aspect of implementing agreements involves either developing inclusive rituals that link different communities or redefining older rituals so they are no longer highly threatening and exclusive. This is not easy where group identity and group celebration is often defined in opposition to another community. Even legitimating divergent identities can be an important part of this process. For example, in the Derry city museum, both Protestant and Catholic accounts of history are presented without favoring either.

Conclusion: Examining Identity and Ethnic Conflict

In conclusion, I want to raise three additional questions—puzzles if you like—whose answers would be especially useful to understanding the significance of identity in ethnic conflict. I suggest that the framework offered here for examining ethnic conflict, with its emphasis on psychocultural interpretations and psychocultural dramas, will help provide good answers to them.

1. What does identity provide us? Short-run sacrifice for the group is rarely in an individual's self-interest, unless we stretch the concept of self-interest in a tautological direction to include whatever it is that a person happens to do, or have a theory such as sociobiology that explains such behavior at the genetic level (while still failing to explain the proximate mechanisms by which it works) (Ross, 1991; Stern, 1995). So how is it that young (mainly male) soldiers fight, and older (mainly male) political leaders devote incredible resources (including their sons) to group struggles, and emotional support for

the group is often so great that dissent is cause for death? The answer probably lies in complex psychocultural dynamics that systematically confound individual and group interests, and in the power of, and insecurity about, an individual's connections to the group (Campbell, 1983).

2. Why is it that there is a striking contrast between the social, contextual, and constructivist character of ethnicity—widely documented in recent social research (e.g., Cohen, 1969; Eller & Coughlan, 1993; Waters, 1990)—and popular and political discourse that sees ethnic groups as fixed, unchanging, and often biological entities that fight over “ancient hatreds” (e.g., Kaplan, 1993)? I suspect that this gap is far more than just the time lag between what social research has discovered and what the public knows. Rather, I would hypothesize that the gap tells us something about how people understand the social world, our powerful needs to see social categories as “real” and stable, and the threats posed to individual identity by a constructivist view of the social universe. Rituals are important because they variously reinforce group boundaries and content, but they also can be significant in changing group identity as well.

Although ethnicity and nationalism are often viewed in terms of enduring and unchanging ingroups—fixed, indelible, almost “biological” categories—we can also view them as mutable and changing over time. But we need to be careful not to go so far as to argue that all categories are arbitrary social constructions. As Smith (1991) argues, although group definition is more socially constructed than popular images hold, it is not as easily altered in the short run, as some constructivist accounts suggest. Rather, we need to explain the social, cultural, and political dynamics that determine how enduring specific identities are, and how they change. In examining ethnic identity over a relatively long (and even medium) term, I hypothesize that terms such as modification, refocusing, broadening, narrowing, incorporation, redefinition, and merging, which can describe changes in the categories themselves and their content, will gain in importance.

3. How can we incorporate identity dynamics into efforts to manage ethnic conflict constructively? To do so, we must begin with the parties' frames of reference, and recognize that cognitive approaches that try to persuade parties that they are wrong, or efforts to change the ethnic categories groups use (governments try to do this all the time), almost always fail. A more productive approach acknowledges groups' perceptions of threats to their identity and seeks to diminish them. For example, recognition and acceptance of the power of a group's narratives can create new possibilities for cooperation. Linking identity (and threats to identity) to new metaphors, or rearranging the content of old ones in culturally acceptable ways, is another possibility for creating new patterns of group interaction.

Volkan (1988, 1997), Montville (1991), and others argue that a crucial dynamic involves mutual acknowledgment of prior loss and processes of collective mourning. Kelman (1987, 1992) stresses the importance for the parties in conflict of coming to believe that acknowledging the other's right to exist is not tantamount to denying their own existence. Such emotional and ritual—not just cognitive—redefinition of a conflict situation is needed for new more complex, and less directly opposed, identities to emerge, such as the emergence of a European identity after the Second World War.

Consider Northern Ireland, where much analysis of the conflict has (appropriately) focused on the long-term discrimination against, and threats to, Catholics (Whyte, 1990). During the period of direct rule since 1974, the government has addressed the most blatant abuses from the past, and the 1998 Good Friday agreement goes a long way toward giving Catholics both some power in the North and formal links to the Republic in the South. An identity-focused analysis recognizes that a crucial problem to address now concerns Protestant identity: their own uncertain self-definition, and how the Catholic community in Ireland (both North and South), the British, and Europe see them (Bryson & McCartney, 1994; Ruane & Todd, 1996). After all, it is not clear to many exactly who these people are. Are they colonial usurpers? The “niggers of Britain,” as some have described them? Ulsterpersons (whatever that is)? British? A powerful challenge to peace-building is whether Catholics can acknowledge Protestant heritage and identity in the North, so that Protestants no longer feel the need to impose themselves on Catholics as aggressively as they do in marches each summer.

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