

Ethnic Conflict in Local Communities and Societies

NWO - Conflict programme line

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Ethnicity

While political, religious, and resource-based conflicts seem to dominate contemporary global arenas, ethnicity is the subtext of many if not most present-day disputes and armed confrontations. The concept of ethnicity refers, in its most elementary sense, to a social identity that defines individuals and groups in differentiation from others. There is usually a culturally interpreted notion of descent or heritage of the group, with distinguishing social markers such as language, religion, geography or ideology.

Ethnicity is an analytical category that emerged in the 1960s. It is, however, no longer only a scientific concept but has been 'taken over' by many groups as a term of self-reference. In recent years, a paradox has emerged: while scholarly views on ethnicity and conflict have decisively shown the malleability and opportunism of ethnic identity as a socio-political strategy within various arenas, ethnic groups or elites speaking in their name have tended to move in the opposite direction: they emphasise cohesion, hard boundaries, essentialist notions and group rights on the basis of 'common descent'.

The absorption of the term ethnicity or ethnic identity into native discourses and politics must seriously engage social researchers. It calls in particular for original comparative and longitudinal approaches to contextualise, and also to make generalisations, about political claim-making processes. More specifically, the conflation of ethnic with religious, cultural and value-oriented elements in the *habitus* – the unconsciously acquired and performed behavioural repertoires – of groups, notably migrant groups and minorities in developed societies, needs more intensive study. This will allow more attention to be paid to the role of self-reported 'values' or ideological representations of individuals or groups that are claimed to be more important than state law or the political system, which very often leads to conflict.

While much is known about ethnic group formation and actual 'ethnic' conflicts, there are still many scientific challenges, especially with regard to patterns of group identification or disidentification, the understanding of the cognitive and emotional bases of ethnic group identity, processes of ethnic mobilisation, the role of ethnic actors (in particular elites and youths) and the policy needs in societies with ethno-cultural diversity. Ethnicity is both a source of group pride or social esteem as well as a discourse of difference, contrast and conflict. Processes of polarisation, i.e. the sharpening of distinctions between different groups, can lead to tensions and to segregation along ethnic and religious lines. This is particularly likely among youths, some of whom, both among the native and immigrant population, are involved in a process of radicalisation in which they challenge ideas and norms of national citizenship and public commitment.

Ethnic distinctions and conflicts involve a process of 'ethnicisation'. A collection of persons can come to see themselves as a distinct group linked by a shared history, by cultural symbols that represent their peoplehood and by bonds of extended kinship. The process of ethnicisation implies group understandings that are the changing result of continuous 'group-making projects' or the bringing about of ethnic groups and ethnic self-understandings. The dynamic nature of these 'projects' can be investigated in different ways and on different levels of analysis: one can focus on the actors involved, such as the role of activists, elites, ethnic entrepreneurs and organizations, on local, regional, national and international contexts, and on the different political, historical and economic opportunities and constraints. Further, it can be examined how discourses and acts of framing determine how qualities, characteristics, events and historical circumstances are interpreted, presented and acted upon. Different groups have different narrative opportunities and face different narrative constraints for managing and negotiating their

self-understanding. Minority groups in particular face the task of dealing with the tensions and contradictions between the various understandings and interpretations. Ethnic identities and distinctions are both ascribed by others and (often in response) developed by group members themselves. This requires a dynamic theoretical and empirical perspective.

Ethnic conflicts

The concept of ethnic conflict refers to, sometimes violent, confrontations between groups or members of groups and collectives on the basis of ethno-cultural distinctiveness, prestige hierarchies and discourses of cultural opposition and competition. Ethnically-styled conflicts are manifold, multi-level and quite diverse in their empirical manifestations.

One of the tasks of researchers is to conceptually question or test the very category of the 'ethnic' in relation to other collective identities such as religion, nationality, social class, gender or region. In addition, there is a need for comparative research into various processes of ethnicisation and the unfolding of 'ethnic' conflicts, for making context-sensitive and historically-grounded case studies of ethnic groups and their trajectories, for the explanation of the development of 'scape-goating' scenarios of conflict and for studying the transnational formation (and hardening or radicalisation) of ethnic groups and ideologies. Both qualitative-historical and quantitative, theory-driven methods can be fruitfully used in order to enhance generalisations beyond the time frames used and comparing the many existing case studies.

Identity functions: Creation and expression

Ethnic group-making processes typically have different functions. At a theoretical level, a distinction between identity functions and instrumental functions can be made. The former refers to the ways in which groups try to create and subsequently express a distinctive and positive identity *vis-à-vis* others. Identity creation gives an answer to the question of who one is and what one's group is about. Individuals and groups try to define and enhance their distinctiveness, providing a meaningful and secure basis for self-definition. Distinctiveness does not have to imply, however, opposition and conflict. A key question is under which conditions thinking in terms of 'us *and* them' leads to thinking in terms of 'us *or* them'; when and how does 'in-group love' turn into 'out-group hate'? When do ethnic and other (e.g., national) identities become incompatible and irreconcilable, both in a social and a psychological sense? Feelings of group threat, mutual trust or distrust and of 'dangerous ideas' are especially relevant here. Also relevant is the question to what extent people can develop hyphenated and nested identities, how these identities are actually managed in social life and what they mean psychologically. Nation states and ethnic minority groups struggle with the question of combining subgroup identities with commitments to the national category. Identity hyphenation suggests that it is possible to have varying degrees of identification with the ethnic minority group and the national category simultaneously: e.g. African-American, Indian-British, Moroccan-Dutch or Turkish-Dutch. However, many inter-group conflicts within plural societies turn on the compatibility or incompatibility of subgroup and national identities.

Individuals and groups not only create identities but at some point also – intentionally or unintentionally – want to express them. Identity expression communicates who one is and what one's group is about and helps to confirm and to validate the distinctiveness and value of one's ethnic identity. This is important for reasons of group cohesion and mobilisation but also in relation to 'outsiders'. These outsiders can tolerate, accept and endorse identity expression, but their responses can also lead to disagreements, struggles and conflicts over

values and the symbolic 'ownership' of institutions and localities such as organisations, neighbourhoods and cities; the construction of mosques in European cities may serve as an example. Questions of multiculturalism, assimilation, minority rights and tolerance are relevant here. In many European countries, for example, multiculturalism is typically seen as identity threatening for the majority group and identity supporting for minority groups. For minority groups, multiculturalism offers the possibility of maintaining and expressing their own culture, but multiculturalism might also lead to processes of segregation and the implicit justification of illiberal practices and internal oppression of women and children. Majority group members, on the other hand, may see ethnic minorities and their desire to maintain and express their culture heritage and identity as a threat to their cultural dominance and national self-understanding. Exclusionist and tolerant or intolerant reactions among the host population, as well as among minority groups, should be studied using longitudinal, comparative and multilevel designs.

Instrumental functions

In addition to the functions of identity creation and identity expression, ethnic group making processes can also have instrumental functions related to the achievement of social, material and political goals, i.e. when they turn into 'projects' enhancing ethnicity. There are many sorts of situations in which there are realistic competitions over 'scarce resources' between individuals and groups. Group competition requires that solidarity is raised and that people are mobilised and become motivated to engage in actual or symbolic competition with others. A dominant group can make claims on the scarce resources and will be motivated to maintain and legitimise the status quo. In contrast, minority groups will try to acquire and mobilise human and other resources in order to bring about social change. This can lead to conflict with the majority population (vertical conflict), but also with other minority groups (horizontal conflict). Various factors and conditions on different levels can be expected to influence the outcomes of these competitions. Questions on the role of available resources, of (everyday, structural and institutional) discrimination and of power relations and legitimising ideologies are relevant here.

The identity and instrumental functions are not independent and may operate in different phases of the group making project and ethnic conflicts. Concerns about scarce resources and ideologies of competition can stimulate the creation and expression of (new) ethnic identities in order to mobilise people and for making claims on resources and rights. It is important to examine how exactly ethnic identities are used for mobilisation in support of, or in opposition to, different forms of social and political action. Furthermore, intolerance for the public expression of ethnic, religious and cultural identities may provoke a rise in traditional and essentialist interpretations of these identities and of processes of disidentification with society, organisations, institutions or neighbourhoods. It is also possible that identity creation is a precondition for identity expression which, in turn, is a preparatory step for instrumental actions.

In addition, ethnic self-understandings often change during processes of mobilisation and action. A dynamic and longitudinal perspective on ethnic conflicts requires a close analysis of group making processes: how ethnic identities and the use of these identities develop and alter in the course of events. Disagreements between and within communities about understandings of what a conflict is all about, who 'we' and 'they' actually are, and who is responsible, are inevitable. Furthermore, in the course of events new parties can get involved and non-ethnic distinctions, such as religion and social class, can become relevant. These changes have implications for the ways in which people see and position themselves and thereby can lead to

alternative forms of action giving new directions to the conflict. Processes of identity formation and identity change in the course of events are critical issues in understanding the development of conflicts and the possibilities for solutions. In-depth case studies as well as longitudinal research is needed here.

Ethnic conflicts and contacts between ethnic groups

Ethnic groups sometimes are territorial in the sense that they claim privileges connected to specific places and get into conflict with other parties if these claims are violated. The search for scarce goods or power may be a reason to enter another group's territory, but entering can also be seen by the protagonists as a symbolic 'trespassing' and as a manifestation of disrespect. These conflicts take place on the national and international level as well as on the local level of neighbourhoods, schools and organisations. Territorial conflicts are conflicts of contact. Paradoxically, it is often argued that ethnic conflict disappears when groups have more actual contact. Nowadays, this seems to be true in the Netherlands, where so called Lonsdale youths get into fights with migrant youths, but mainly do so in smaller cities. These conflicting youth groups are absent in big cities that are more multicultural. This raises the question as to whether conflicts emerge when ethnic groups meet and mingle or rather when they try to stay separate. In the latter case, negative stereotypes, strong group boundaries and a lack of mutual understanding can be the result. In the former case, growing socio-economic and cultural similarity between groups often leads to polarisation rather than accommodation. People at some point start to differentiate themselves, seeking boundary markers derived from the ethnic or religious domain.

A key question is whether and when increased contact between ethnic groups and group members leads to tolerance and mutual acceptance or rather to increased differentiation and competition. Different factors can be important here, such as demographic compositions and shifts, the role of authorities, opportunities for cooperation and status and power differences. Ethnicity, being implied in prestige hierarchies and rankings of groups both economically and culturally, is always susceptible to conflict. Indeed, the use of ethnicity by ethnic leaders or members of ethnic groups tends to reinforce group boundaries and the formation of antagonistic images of 'the other'. Elites play a crucial role, but they act via the wider constituency, which may either allow them or restrict them in developing the ethnic agenda.

Migration patterns from the 'South' to the 'North' have added to the pluralism of modern industrial societies and to the rise of 'diasporic' communities. Modern socio-economic and technological conditions (transnational banking, Internet, satellite TV) allow migrant communities to maintain active (virtual) links with the 'homeland' and to reinforce their economic, political and ideological connections with outside forces. A new diasporic group identity can be cultivated via websites and satellite channels that obviate the need to identify or adapt significantly to the host society. A fruitful domain of research is to study these emerging connections, and the often conscious processes of 'identity construction' and moral discourses by self-appointed leaders, spokesmen and 'ethnic entrepreneurs' and see their links with their alleged constituency.

Conflicts may have historical roots and clear links to themes such as slavery, colonial ties or important events such as wars. References to these themes can be used for making political claims and demanding compensations. 'Ethnic' violence has a particular symbolic-emotional force that seems to be transmitted to the next generations. In these cases too, important transnational developments can fuel ethnic conflicts that will influence relations between local ethnic communities. Local incidents can also be linked to these 'bigger' themes. For example,

an incident in a neighbourhood such as the death of a civilian by a police bullet may become the starting point of an ethnic-styled conflict, often by street youths. The kick-off for the 2005 riots in the French *banlieus* as well as recent incidents in Dutch cities are examples. Research on the role of these critical incidents and the way they are managed is needed.

Youth

There is a critically important, more general, issue here that needs to be examined in detail. This is the development of ethnic identity and interethnic relations among children and youths of different ethnic groups and in different contexts, both in deeply divided societies and in more harmonious ones. How do children and adolescents develop a self-understanding of what it means to be a member of an ethnic minority or, rather, majority group? How do they develop images, stereotypes and feelings towards their own ethnic group and others? How do children and youths of different ethnic groups reason about questions of civil liberties and democratic decision making procedures? Why is it that social relations and friendships become increasingly structured along ethnic lines during adolescence? Does a well-developed or strong ethnic identity serve as a secure position to be more open and accepting to people from other ethnic groups or, rather, does such an identity lead to more negative reactions towards ethnic outsiders? These are important questions for improving our understanding about the ways that the young generation develops an understanding of multicultural contexts and societies.

Another important domain of study is the ways in which young people use the internet and modern media. Ethnic identities accommodate and adapt to events and actualities around the globe. This is true for incidents like '9/11', but in many other cases too the information and discussion on the internet fuels radicalisation and leads to ethnic conflict. For example, stereotypes of American street gangs, advertised through popular rap music and distributed through the internet, can inspire youths to start their own Crips or Bloods gangs. These originally African-American gangs from Los Angeles are copied and adapted throughout the world by mostly 'black' youths that hold a grudge against society. In Europe especially, the conflicts these gangs get into then seem to become easily connected to ethnicity.

More specifically, both in the Netherlands and abroad, polarisation and radicalisation are considered to be growing problems. In the Netherlands, several instances of violent neighbourhood intimidation as well as of clashes between right-wing extremist youths and children of migrants have been observed. In 2005, the Dutch intelligence service AIVD considered interethnic conflicts and polarisation to be the 'largest threat to the Dutch democratic legal order'. The causes of the growing polarisation among youths and the extent to which strong ethnic perceptions relate to processes of polarisation and radicalisation are important subjects for future research.

Interventions in ethnic conflicts¹

As stated above, ethnic conflicts take place at different levels. They can be purely localised events or they can be part of larger national or regional processes. They may occur in societies that are otherwise at peace or they can be part of a larger, possibly civil, war. They may also take the shape of either vertical conflicts (civilians against their governments) or horizontal conflicts (between different ethnic groups). Interventions have to be studied and organised according to these contexts and they can take place at different stages of the conflict. Thus,

¹ The subject of conflict escalation and interventions is dealt with explicitly within the programme line *Conflict Escalation, Justice and Intervention*. Here, some thoughts are presented about ethnic conflicts in particular.

interventions may take the form of prevention, resolution, management or transformation. These forms of conflict management need further study in order to obtain a better understanding of the underlying processes and conditions for effectiveness. Moreover, intervention in ethnic conflicts may have both positive and negative functions and consequences. A question to be asked, therefore, is: positive and negative consequences for whom exactly: the local population, the threatened elites or the intervening powers?

Prevention is geared to precluding non-violent disagreement in an ethnically plural society from turning violent. Prevention can be done either by the ruling authorities or by a third party (usually by way of diplomacy) and can involve issues such as guarantees for minority rights, the outlawing of hate speech, equality of access to education, political and economic participation, recourse to mediation, the protection of land and property rights and the suppression of the use of arms by opposing groups.

Once conflicts become violent they can be characterised by lynching, rioting, civil strife, terrorism or warfare. Violence may be used to obtain forced population transfers (ethnic-based expulsions), boundary alterations (partition, secession) or the extermination of another ethnic group (genocide). In general, resolutions of ethnic conflicts seem to follow the overall lines of conflict resolution, i.e. they are not specific because of the fact that ethnicity is involved. However, the existence of diasporas can be crucial and their role and impact should be studied in more detail.

Because ethnicity is largely determined by the notion of a common heritage, it is difficult to de-ethnicise people's consciousness once they have begun thinking in ethnic terms, have experienced security threats because of their ethnic identity and have lived through traumatic events centring upon their ethnicity. Therefore, a more lasting solution has to be established by de-emphasising ethnic factors and by either management or transformation of the conflict. There are different methods for temporarily managing differences and for the co-existence of different ethnic groups, such as hegemonic control, arbitration, territorial devolution, cantonisation or federalism, power-sharing or an ongoing dialogue. Another option is conflict transformation in which attempts are made to reframe the positions of conflicting parties into peaceful outcomes and to work on reconciliation and the healing of 'ethnic traumas'. Research needs to examine these strategies and the conditions under which they succeed or fail.

Apart from general solutions for conflicts, ethnic conflicts may need special solutions, e.g. for minority returns or outlawing discrimination. Another possibility is to change the shared narrative from the group level to an overarching level. The development of shared or common categories that include the different ethnic groups or subgroups is a potentially useful strategy for redressing conflicts, although it should not be ignored that many 'members' of these groups have a more individual rather than collective ethnic self-conception. More research is needed on the question of how such shared identities can develop 'bottom-up', as based on the experiences and perceptions of people themselves, as well as 'top-down', by attempts to introduce new categories or re-interpret existing ones. It is also important to examine to what extent these common identities should ignore or neglect subgroup divisions that are felt to be important.

Finally, it is interesting to establish why in certain cases ethnic conflicts can be mitigated without intervention and why intervention can result in negative effects. For example, democratisation may contribute to exacerbations of the ethnic community relations rather than mitigating them. Local communities may be rather vulnerable to outside interventions,

especially those that change the demographic composition of the population (differing birth rates, migration, expulsion and flight), the socio-economic status of a group or the security situation (especially represented by the local police force). Consequently, comparative studies that analyse the differing effects of the various interventions will be valuable.

Research questions

Several fields of investigation have been identified in this programme. The leading question will be:

Under which conditions and how precisely does thinking in terms of '**us and them**' lead to thinking and acting in terms of '**us or them**', resulting in sometimes violent confrontations between groups or members of groups and collectivities on the basis of ethno-cultural distinctiveness, prestige hierarchies and discourses of cultural opposition and competition?

Taking into consideration the three trends in scientific research and theory development discerned in the original proposal "Conflict: Functions, Dynamics, and Cross-Level Influences" (December 2006) – i.e. multifaceted functions of conflict, the dynamic and longitudinal character of conflict and cross-level influences – research projects may focus on such questions as:

- When and why does increased contact between ethnic groups and group members lead to tolerance and mutual acceptance or rather to increased differentiation and competition?
- When and why do ethnic and other identities become incompatible and irreconcilable, both in a societal and a psychological sense? How do children and adolescents develop images, stereotypes and feelings toward their own ethnic group and other groups? What are the main causes of growing polarization among Dutch youths? When and why do well-developed or strong ethnic identities serve as a secure position to be more open and accepting to people from other ethnic groups, or, rather lead to more negative reactions towards ethnic outsiders? To what extent does segregation lead to ethnic radicalization and polarization?
- What are the most effective means to counter-act radicalising tendencies among Muslim youths?