There is a powerful tension between the context-specific analyses which figure prominently in the social sciences in recent years and the emphasis on universal human dynamics which characterizes cross-cultural psychology. Using the example of ethnic conflict, I seek to bridge the two and suggest that underlying the thick description of single conflicts as the parties understand them is what an earlier generation of psychological anthropologists called “the psychic unity of mankind,” referring to deep structural similarities in all cultures, which make us human (Spier, 1987). I propose that a cultural analysis of ethnic conflict can effectively build an explanation putting each conflict in a context which highlights what the parties believe is at stake; identifying both the concrete interests and threats to identity crucial to the disputants; linking interests and identities to psychocultural interpretations and the motives underlying them; and proposing that successful settlement of ethnic conflicts means that the parties themselves must actively work toward proposals which address both their competing interests and core identity needs.

KEY WORDS: culture; ethnic conflict; ethnicity; psychocultural interpretations

INTRODUCTION

There is a powerful tension between the context-specific analyses which figure prominently in anthropology—and other social sciences—in recent years and the emphasis on universal human dynamics which characterizes cross-cultural psychology. These differences are reflected in each approach’s principal goals, concepts, theories, and methods. However, there are good reasons to think that a synthesis of elements of both the particularisms of contextual analysis and the generalizations of cross-cultural psychology offers richer explanations than either might provide alone. Using the example of ethnic conflict, I suggest that underlying the thick
description of single conflicts as the parties understand them is what an earlier generation of psychological anthropologists called “the psychic unity of mankind,” referring to deep structural similarities in all cultures, which make us human (Spiro, 1987). I propose that a cultural analysis can effectively synthesize these two approaches and illustrate this using the example of ethnic conflict.

Ethnic conflict offers an important political example of the tension between rich particularistic accounts and more universal analyses. Many observers suggest that with the end of the Cold War, intransigent ethnic and regional conflicts are likely to pose the greatest threats to peace (Huntington, 1993). While some of these conflicts, such as in Sri Lanka, Rwanda, or Northern Ireland, are long-term disputes, there is also a sense that others, such as in the ex-Yugoslavia, developed an unexpected intensity in a very short time. Clearly there is widespread interest in understanding the origin, escalation, and peaceful settlement of these conflicts. Yet the analysis of intense ethnic conflicts has developed far more slowly than the disputes themselves. There is a large gap between accounts which only emphasize the cultural and historical particularities of single conflict and others which offer too facile generalizations.

Ethnic groups are social and political, but also cultural, groupings, and some of the acts which produce the greatest outrage in ethnic conflicts are pointed cultural affronts (Huntington, 1993; Tambiah, 1986). Yet existing analyses are often uncertain about how to treat the issue of culture. For many there is the belief that cultural expressions are a sideshow, a sort of distraction, a language to express outrage but are neither a cause of the conflict nor what it is really about. As a result cultural analysis of ethnic conflict is not well-developed and there is ambivalence about how to treat culture analytically and uncertainty about its relevance for ethnic conflict management. For example, Horowitz (1985) in his comprehensive analysis of ethnic conflict is uncertain about what role to assign culture; he first roots ethnicity and ethnic conflict very firmly in a cultural context which emphasizes the length to which groups will go when cultural identity is threatened, but then later (and in subsequent writings) he argues that successful solutions to ethnic conflict must focus on political arrangements which provide incentives for intergroup cooperation rather than (by implication) on cultural issues.

A cultural approach offers a bridge between the very specific and the too general, putting each conflict in a context which highlights what the parties believe is at stake: identifying both the concrete interests and threats to identity crucial to the disputants; linking interests and identities to psychocultural interpretations and the motives underlying them; and proposing that successful settlement of ethnic conflicts means that the parties themselves must actively work toward proposals which address both their competing interests and core identity needs.

At the outset I want to make it clear that I am not arguing that cultural differences cause conflict and to note that some of the most bitter conflicts in the
world occur between groups who, in objective terms, are quite similar. Likewise, differences, portrayed in emblems and other symbolic forms, allow ingroups to distinguish between fellow ingroup members and outsiders, and are used in conflict but are not the cause of the conflict, per se. However, attention to cultural—and cross-cultural—particularities, is needed to answer questions about the origins, persistence, and intensity of ethnic disputes and to building meaningful psychocultural generalizations about ethnic conflict and efforts to settle ethnically rooted conflicts.

I begin by offering questions a cultural perspective on politics might address, consider objections to cultural analysis, and then turn to the specific issue of ethnic conflict and its settlement. I conclude that attention to cultural dimensions of political life offers an opportunity to bridge contextually specific beliefs and behaviors and the psychologically general processes underlying them. I make this argument to offer an example of the kind of questions cross-cultural political psychology is able to examine productively.

CULTURE AND POLITICS: KEY CONCEPTS AND QUESTIONS

Culture and Politics

Culture, a central concept in anthropology, has been defined in a variety of ways over time. A widely cited definition is Geertz’s which views culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (1973b, p. 89). This view emphasizes culture as public, shared meanings; behaviors, institutions, and social structure are understood not as culture itself but as culturally constituted phenomena (Spiro, 1984). Culture is usefully thought of as a worldview which explains why and how individuals and groups behave as they do and includes both cognitive and affective beliefs about social reality and assumptions about when, where, and how people in one’s culture and those in other cultures are likely to act in particular ways. For purposes of political analysis, to this anthropological conception of culture there needs to be added the idea of

1 Donald T. Campbell warns about the need to “avoid the ethnic patriot’s view that differences (the outgroup’s evil ways) cause and justify conflict” (personal communication).
2 D'Andrade (1984, p. 88) points out the radical shift from the view of culture as behavior which could be understood within a stimulus-response framework to culture as systems of meaning in a number of fields. For a more complete discussion of culture as meanings and symbols, see the excellent discussions in Schweder and LeVine (1984).
3 I do not distinguish here between the notion of worldview and the idea of a social schema which many analysts use in a similar way. Elsewhere (and below) I analyze conflict in terms of worldviews found in psychocultural interpretations which offer culturally shared beliefs about what is worth fighting about, how conflicts are to be waged, and what opponents motives are (Ross, 1993a and 1993b, 1995).
self-consciousness that the widely shared understandings occur among people who have a common (and almost invariably named) identity which marks distinctions between the group and outsiders. Culture, in short, marks “a distinctive way of life” characterized in the subjective we-feelings of cultural group members (and outsiders) that the way of life is unique. While culture can be examined through the beliefs about the distinctiveness of a lifestyle and worldview which members of a group hold, it is expressed through specific behaviors (customs and rituals)—both sacred and profane— which mark the daily, yearly, and life cycle rhythms of its members and reveal how people view past, present, and future events and understand choices they face. Cultural metaphors have both cognitive meaning which describes group experience and high affective salience which emphasizes the unique intragroup bonds—almost like a secret code—which sets one group’s experience apart from others.

Placing the concept of culture at the center of analysis encourages us to ask certain questions and not others about political life. For example, an interest in distinctive ways of life and worldviews leads to questions about how differences in worldviews might explain such universal phenomena as reactions to leaders, proposed collective actions, or external threats. At the same time, a concern with culture and cultural difference discourages inquiry into rational self-interest in political choice-making to the extent that such questions presume that interests and their maximization are more or less invariant across cultures and hardly need a theory of cultural variation to explain what is viewed as constant (Wildavsky, 1987). The five questions about culture and politics I raise suggest how cultural analysis enhances our understanding of politics but are hardly the only questions we could raise about their interconnection.

1) Culture frames the contest in which politics occurs.

Culture orders political priorities (Laitin, 1986, p. 11), meaning it defines the symbolic and material objects people consider valuable and worth fighting over, the contexts in which such disputes occur, and the rules (both formal and informal) by which politics takes place and who participates in it. For example, anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon (1967) invokes the cultural importance of the value of fierceness (waiereri complex) to explain the prevalence of high warfare among Yanomamo communities; political scientist Edward Banfield (1958) explains the absence of political participation and civic society in southern Italy in terms of a cultural pattern he calls amoral familism; and political scientists Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963) explain differences in political attitudes and patterns of voting.

Although he didn’t write much about culture per se, Karl Deutsch (1957), who discussed both a distinctive way of life and we-feelings in his early writing about nationalism, was writing about culture as I use the term. Phil Kilbride (personal communication) notes the connections between the definition of culture present here and Goodenough’s (1970) idea of culture as “standards for proper behavior,” with its cognitive emphasis on “what you have to know to behave properly in a given society.”
participation among the U.S., Great Britain, Germany, and Italy in terms of differences among participant, subject, and parochial political cultures. A useful way to understand the cultural framing of politics is to consider how culture influences ideas about, and the organization of, community, authority, and conflict (Ross, 1988).

**Community.** Political communities are defined by two elements. One is a sense of common identity, supported by what Deutsch (1957) has called a sense of “linked fate,” the idea that the welfare of community members is interdependent. Furthermore, Geertz (1973b) suggests that community members share “schematic images of the social order” which need to be understood as responses to cultural as well as social and psychological strain. Most simply this identity is expressed through a common name, but it also must be added that patterns of action linking different communities for purposes such as military action, ritual activity, or decision-making produce other groupings which may be short-lived and are not always clearly named. The other key element in community is the existence of institutions and practices which, as Deutsch says, more or less ensure the peaceful resolution of differences between members (1957).

While communities are distinct entities, they are also nested so that people belong to more than one community and develop multiple loyalties. Some reinforce each other, while others are cross-cutting, meaning that different attachments pull people in more than one direction. Both anthropological and political theory have long emphasized the importance of cross-cutting ties—linkages of kinship, trade, ritual organization, or just friendship that can unite people in different communities in the same society. When ties are cross-cutting, we expect higher levels of collective action to be undertaken, and for disputes to be managed peacefully within the society, along with a greater ability to resist the pressures of outsiders.

**Authority.** Authority consists of regularized procedures for distributing tangible and symbolic goods which members of a community consider more or less legitimate—meaning that they consider the procedures in a community fair. Authority is about publicly sanctioned actions, involving compliance with allocation and other decisions, based on the use of force to back decisions taken in the name of the community. Power, in contrast, results in compliance based on coercion or force alone, while influence or persuasion produces compliance among relative equals based on arguments or other social pressures, but not physical force or right.

The establishment of legitimate authority is a historical process for a community (Arendt, 1958) and a psychocultural one for individuals, which involves the development of an emotional attachment to particular procedures and styles. Affective aspects of political authority, associated with deep emotional needs, can be understood as collective identification with individuals occupying crucial authority positions in a society (Freud, 1922; Jones, 1936) and a sense of linked fate among individuals such that they are willing to tolerate short-run hardship. Identifications with authority develop and are maintained through ritual experi-
ences (including religious action) (Edelman, 1964; Kertzer, 1988; Shils & Young, 1953; Turner, 1957, 1968). Thus, political authority, both cognitively and affectively, connects people’s everyday experience and anxiety to those of the collective while the exercise of authority often results in attachment, reassurance, and order, but can also be mobilized for change or revolution.

Conflict. Conflict occurs in virtually all communities, but there are important cross-cultural differences in its levels and forms. A basic distinction is between conflicts which take place within preexisting rules that members of a community accept, and conflicts about the rules themselves. The former reinforce existing authority patterns while the latter seek to revise them. The importance of psychocultural dynamics can be seen in the analysis of conflict at the microlevel. Because similar events continue to produce different understandings and reactions, it is important to consider the interpretation of events as crucial to the conflict process. Why is it that taking an object from another person in a small Atlantic fishing community is variously viewed as theft when it is done by a social outsider and borrowing when a social insider is involved (Yngevesson, 1978)? Both psychological and cultural processes are central here as groups and individuals develop understandings, sometimes but not often explicit, about social action, about others in their world, about intentions, about what is valued, and about the goals of action.

(2) Culture links individual and collective identities

Culture offers an account of political behavior through shared worldviews which make particular actions more or less likely. The crucial connection at work is that of identification, which renders certain actions reasonable and removes alternatives which on other grounds might be equally plausible (Northrup, 1989). Both individual and collective action, this view suggests, are motivated, in part, by the sense of common fate that people in a culture share involving two distinct elements: the strong reinforcement between individual and collective identity which renders culturally sanctioned behavior rewarding; the sense that outsiders will treat oneself and other members of one’s group in similar ways.

From a psychoanalytic developmental perspective, identification occurs when a person constructs bonds to an external object and these attachments alter one’s subsequent actions. Psychocultural analyses are, not surprisingly, interested in how people in a culture share these objects and develop common reactions to them. Objects of identification can be frustrating, resulting in destructive actions (A. Freud, 1937; S. Freud, 1922). However, Freud also described another, more positive form of identification which arises from loss of love (Freud, 1914; 1917). When an object of identification is benign, Schafer says a child derives a sense “of mastery, competence, or independence . . . [and] there is an atmosphere of precious intimacy surrounding these identifications—a glow of well-being that is also seen in fond embraces” (1968, p. 154). Identification is associated with the development
of a superego which monitors behaviors and feelings and is a normal aspect of psychological maturation.

Contemporary psychoanalytic writing emphasizes identification dynamics in the construction of internal images of the external world. Many of the objects of identification involve primitive primary sensations, such as smell, taste, and sound, which acquire intense affective meaning and only later acquire a cognitive component. People sharing cultural attachments have common experiences which facilitate the developmental task of incorporating group identity into one’s own sense of self. Cultures, especially when they are under stress, emphasize what ingroup members share, giving greater emotional weight to the common elements and reinforcing them with an ideology of linked fate. The process is probably best viewed as a kind of “psychocultural regression to the mean” that overemphasizes what is common within culture, where variations are selectively ignored and negatively sanctioned, and differences with outsiders exaggerated.

The political relevance of identification dynamics lies in the psychocultural construction of groups which both seem natural to people and provide the basis for social and political action. It should be stressed that culture is only one basis for linking individual to social identity. It can be a particularly powerful one, however, in situations of threat and uncertainty because cultural attachments are connected to very primary feelings about identity. While much of our language (in Western thought generally and psychoanalysis in particular) emphasizes an inherent conflict between the group and the individual, this emphasis on identity draws attention to ways in which social attachments are an integral way of strengthening individual identity.

(3) Culture defines the boundaries and organizes actions within and between groups.

Culture defines groups and patterns of association within and between them. Cultural definitions of groups—whether they are defined by kinship, age, gender, or common interests—entail clear expectations about how people are to act. Consider such basic questions as where a couple lives after marriage, who spends time together, to whom one is most attached emotionally, who controls scarce resources, how property is transferred between generations, and how work is organized. The world’s cultures provide very different answers to each of these questions, but most important the evidence shows that how each culture answers these questions has significance for how people act and expect others to behave (Naroll, 1970; Levinson & Malone, 1981). Cultural norms regarding intergroup relations (here we can consider relations between groups in the same culture such as age or ritual groups or groups from different cultures) can be highly elaborate and sometimes ambiguous as well. Cultures differ in how and when they restrict (and how they enforce such restrictions on) such relations, but few are silent on this question.
Of course people don’t often think about the origin of group categories, for most are seen as natural, often biological in character, when in fact they are cultural and political constructions whose “reasonableness” needs to be regularly reasserted and taught to succeeding generations (Anderson, 1991). Weber, for example, shows how the 19th century French state through the institutionalization of a national education system, investment in transportation, and universal male military service created a sense of national identity out of a myriad of regional loyalties (1976). All cultures, of course, provide specific, but not always explicit, socialization regarding ingroup and outgroup distinctions. Cultural learning involves messages about groups’ motives, expectations about their behavior, and how one is to act toward members of each outgroup.

The rigidity of social distinctions and clarity of group boundaries vary cross-culturally and shift change over time. This is clearly seen in the literature on “situational ethnicity” which shows how distinctions among groups can depend upon what other groups are in a social environment and what the particular political stakes are in a conflict. In East Africa, for example, speakers of Kikuyu whose homeland is in western Kenya, gradually developed since 1900 a political and social identity as Luhya people through contact with other ethnic communities in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kampala, and other urban centers during this century. Earlier, however, their identity was as Marigoli or Samia, other more localized Baluhya regional subgroups. Abner Cohen’s (1969) discussion (see below) of how cultural organization provides a powerful resource for political mobilization emphasizes the importance of boundary maintenance in the development of political distinctiveness.

(4) Culture provides a framework for interpreting the actions and motives of others.

In cross-cultural encounters people most often make sense of another group’s behavior—attribute motives to them—by drawing on their own cultural worldview since this way of understanding behavior—which is almost always intracultural—is successful most of the time. This is a complicated process which I won’t discuss here, for I only want to distinguish between two contrasting strategies for encounters with other cultures. One is to apply the rules of one’s own culture because they are, after all, what is best known (and often all that is known), assuming that outsiders will respond as insiders do. The second is to search for different rules, assuming that outsiders share few motives with people in one’s own culture; hence they will respond in “heathen” ways and are likely to take advantage of any weakness shown to them—for they will not follow what are viewed as “civilized norms.” The first strategy is that of generalization while the second is one of differentiation.

An important question is the extent to which any culture characteristically exhibits generalizing or differentiating behaviors, at least in certain domains, in encounters with outsiders. For example, my cross-cultural research on internal and external conflict and violence shows that in some cultures the level of conflict with
insiders and outsiders is quite similar (generalizers) while in others it is highly
differentiated. The differences between the two groups of societies are quite clear:
differentiating societies are characterized by many ties which link diverse groups
in the society and which clearly mark it off from outsiders, while generalizing
societies are those without strong mechanisms of internal integration, and probably
a key reason why insiders and outsiders are treated somewhat the same is because
whether one is an insider or outsider vis-à-vis a group is defined contextually and
not in absolute terms (Ross, 1993a, Chapter 7).

Actions, like words, are often highly ambiguous and making sense of them
requires a shared cultural framework to assure that the meaning which is sent is
similar to, if not identical with, that which is received. Clearly, this is most visible
in culturally homogeneous settings, but we also can see it in multicultural settings
(such as large cities) where people from quite different cultural groups develop
shared understandings in domains (such as the marketplace) with frequent inter-
group interactions. Few behaviors are so universal that they require little or no
interpretation. The work on the cross-cultural (and even cross-species) interpret-
ability of specific facial gestures, while fascinating, is also testimony to how few
domains of human action are coherent outside of a shared cultural framework
(Ekman, Friesen, & Ellsworth, 1972; Masters & Sullivan 1989). Because most
political and social action is complex, a capacity to decode only facial, and other
obvious physical, gestures doesn’t get one very far in understanding political life.
It also provides little assistance in placing action in a broader context which offers
an account of what someone has done and, in addition, says why she did it.

Addressing this question requires saying something about motives which are
central to cultural analysis in providing a mechanism which links individual action
to a broader social setting (D’Andrade & Strauss, 1992). Motives are located in
individuals but are widely shared and transmitted at the cultural level and explain
“how culture works” to produce particular behaviors. This contrasts with Geertz’s
focus on “inspecting events” to make sense of actors’ interpretations of them, and
his rejection of the idea that we should examine mental structures (1973a, pp.
10–12). D’Andrade’s (1992) cultural analysis of motives develops the notion of
schema (what I am calling worldview), “a conceptual structure which makes
possible the identification of objects and events” (1992, p. 28) and he argues that
schemas are culturally acquired and produce “motivational strivings.” He empha-
sizes the importance of understanding the context-dependent nature of schemas as
interpretive devices and the need to spell out how they are acquired. Both he and
Strauss agree that we need to see cultures as “both the public actions, objects and
symbols that make shared learning possible . . . and the private psychological states
of knowledge and feeling without which these public things are meaningless and
could not be recreated” (1992, p. 6).

In important ways motives in cultural analysis are much like interests in
rational choice theory. In statements such as “They were motivated by fear of their
ancestors and so they sacrificed half of their livestock” or “The blips had an interest
in weakening the military capability of their enemy," both motives and interest offer a "reasonable" account of why individuals or groups behave in a certain way. Yet there are also significant differences in the use of motives and interests as explanatory mechanisms which are central to the difference between cultural and rational choice explanations. Most basically, while rational choice theory assumes that interests are more or less transparent (some would say given), universal, and rooted in the structure of a situation, cultural analysis emphasizes that motives are located in individuals in particular cultural contexts and only knowable through empirical analysis of particular cultural contexts. As a result, while turning to interests suggests that more or less any human group would behave the same way in a certain situation, an emphasis on motives is far more interested in explaining variation in behavior. Wildavsky (1987) argues that rational choice theorists make a serious error in taking interests as given. In fact, he says there is systematic variation in interests which an empirically based cultural analysis shows.

In an analysis of intracultural behavior, the difference between motives and interests is not always very consequential, for in fact when interests are shared they certainly operate like motives, offering a readily available account of why people behave as they do. Furthermore, in most cultures, public discourse is about interests, not the motives which underlie them. When we consider cross-cultural encounters, the difference between interests and motives is more significant. Consider the statement above that a group of people are motivated by fear of their ancestors and therefore slaughter half their domestic animals. To people in another culture in which such fears are unknown—that is, they are not motives for action—such behavior is not comprehensible. Trying to transform such an explanation into an interest statement ("They had an interest in not making the ancestors angry") still begs the question of why the group understands the world in terms of "fear of the ancestors," where worry about their anger kills domestic animals as a reaction to this fear. Only an analysis which seeks to explain why this motive is important in one culture but not another is adequate here.

Shared cultural frameworks are rarely the subject of self-conscious analysis, for people deeply internalize cultural assumptions and rarely see them as problematic. It is only when people run into problems that such questions might be raised. Yet even here there is a widespread (if not universal) ethnocentric tendency to suggest that "there is something wrong" with a person who fails to offer or misreads an obvious cultural signal, and to take such behavior as evidence that something is "wrong" with that person or of the inferiority of the other group. For the most part

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5 There have been efforts to identify a fixed number of human motives such as Murray’s (1938) and McClelland’s work on three particular motives—achievement, affiliation, and power. It is important to recognize that in both of these cases—especially McClelland’s—it was clear that the relative importance of any single motive varied cross-culturally and across individuals as well.

6 Of course, I really would like rational choice theorists to see interests as culturally determined and to begin to analyze them subjectively. Doing this would mean treating interests much like what I call motives and would locate them in individuals in specific cultural contexts, not just situations alone.
culturally shared worldviews are protected and people will go to great lengths to resist changes which challenge their core elements.

(5) **Culture provides political resources for political organization and mobilization.**

Culture offers significant resources which leaders and groups use as instruments of organization and mobilization (Kertzer, 1988; Laitin, 1985). Certainly this is seen in the “culture wars” found in American politics (and elsewhere) over issues such as abortion, gun control, school prayer, and textbook censorship. Anthropologist Abner Cohen (1968, 1981, 1974) spells out the political uses of culture, emphasizing the importance of cultural organization as a political tool in situations where “normal politics” is not possible for one reason or another. Cohen’s analysis of Hausa traders in Ibadan (Nigeria) and Creoles in Freetown (Sierra Leone) shows that if the two small minorities had used electoral strategies to pursue their economic and political goals, this would have likely resulted in massive defeats. Instead the two groups organized around cultural activities—a religious revival focused on the Tijaniyyi brotherhood in the case of Hausa, and Freemasonry for the Creoles. In each case these cultural responses to changing political situations result in intense within-group interaction and social exchange with which to maintain control over the long-distance trade, in the case of the Hausa, and the Creole’s domination of the state elite.

Frequently groups use cultural organizations (not always consciously as Cohen points out) to achieve goals which cannot be pursued directly. He identifies six political problems addressed by cultural organization, which bolster group solidarity and effective mobilization (Cohen, 1969, pp. 201–210). (1) Such organizations help define a group’s distinctiveness, meaning its membership and sphere of operation within the context of the contemporaneous political setting, through myths of origin and claims to superiority, descent and endogamy, moral exclusiveness, endo-culture, spatial proximity, and homogenization (201–204). (2) Cultural organizations meet the political need for intense internal communications among its constituent parts (205). (3) Cultural organizations offer mechanisms for decision-making involving some formulation of general problems confronting the group and taking decisions about them (206). (4) They provide authority for implementing decisions and for speaking, where appropriate, on behalf of the group (207). (5) Cultural organizations can provide a political ideology often rooted in the language of kinship and ritual, which gives legitimacy to power and converts it into authority (208–210). (6) Finally, cultural organizations meet the need for discipline, through

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7 Laitin (1986) offers a fascinating examination of what he calls the two faces of culture: one most associated with Geertz which emphasizes culture as meaning, and the other he links to Abner Cohen which emphasizes culture as a resource for political entrepreneurs. His subtle analysis of the two perspectives emphasizes their differences, while my purposes are more to emphasize the central role of culture in each.
ceremonials and rituals which connect the ideology to current problems of the community.

In discussing religion, the quintessential cultural basis for political organization, Cohen points out that:

Religion provides an ideal ‘blueprint’ for the development of an informal political organization. It mobilizes many of the most powerful emotions which are associated with the basic problems of human existence and gives legitimacy and stability to political arrangements by representing these as parts of the system of the universe. It makes it possible to mobilize the power of symbols and the power inherent in the ritual relationship between various ritual positions within the organization of the cult. It makes possible to use the arrangements for financing and administering places of worship and associated places for welfare, education, and social activities of various sorts, to use these in developing the organization and administration of political functions. Religion also provides frequent and regular meetings in congregations, where in the course of ritual activities, a great deal of informal interaction takes place, information is communicated, and general problems are formulated and discussed. The system of myths and symbols which religion provides is capable of being continuously interpreted and reinterpreted in order to accommodate it to changing economic, political and other social circumstances. (p. 210)

While Cohen’s analysis is about the coping strategies of small cultural minorities, it is clearly relevant to understanding how leaders of large ethnic groups (often, but not always, majorities) have come to, and held onto, political power. African politics since the 1960s provides many examples of ethnic mobilization around cultural symbols and fears, and so do European settings such as Northern Ireland, France (with a strong anti-immigrant, anti-foreigner party), and Germany, with its numerous outbreaks of anti-foreigner violence. It is, however, in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union where we perhaps have the most to learn about the political manipulation of cultural symbols and rituals and their sometimes disastrous consequences. Here we must ask why the appeals to Serbian, Armenian, or Hungarian identity are all so powerful. Yet as Campbell (1983) has suggested, any such answer which relies on mechanisms of individual benefit only makes sense if we can also account for the strength of individual attachments to groups such as those defined in abstract cultural terms.

IF CULTURE IS SO IMPORTANT, WHY HAVEN’T POLITICAL SCIENTISTS EMPHASIZED IT MORE?

The previous section emphasizes the promising nature of cultural analyses of political life. Yet relatively few political scientists show much interest in culture as
a tool of analysis, for reasons which are also associated with the slow development of cross-cultural political psychology.

The unit of analysis problem. Most political scientists are worried when the entities they study cannot be defined in a precise manner. Voters, states, wars, international organization—all can be defined and subject to a wide range of analyses. However, political scientists are far more squeamish about units of analysis whose core is imprecise. What is a culture?, some ask, meaning “How do I know one when I see one?” since it is not a unit of social or political organization. Furthermore, the imprecision of everyday language use makes a culture’s key properties very unclear. As a result we can hear references to Western culture, French culture, Breton culture, rural Breton culture, etc. Where does the parsing stop? Conceptually my answer is that the appropriate level depends on what one wants to explain. However, this is not always a very usable methodological guide to someone conducting empirical research.

Huntington offers a similar answer when he describes a range of what he calls cultural entities starting with villages and moving to regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, religious groups, and finally to civilizations. Each has distinct cultural features which distinguish it from similar units in other cultural entities. The key for him is that the civilization is “the highest grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species” (1993, p. 24). He says (following Horowitz, 1985) that which level of cultural identity is the most salient at any moment depends upon where someone is and what they are doing with whom. Cultural identity from this perspective is layered and situationally defined. The same person could variously define herself as a Breton, as French, or as a European depending upon with whom she is interacting and what she perceives at stake in a particular situation.

The boundary problem. If the unit of analysis problem is about the core, the boundary problem concerns the edges (Barth, 1969). Where does one culture stop and another begin? Since cultures, unlike states or political parties, are not formal units of organization, treating them as independent units of political analysis can be troubling indeed. No matter that states aren’t as independent as our political and methodological theory leads us to believe. (Nor are voters, but that’s another matter.) For purposes of most analyses we emphasize the independence of these

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8 Renshon (personal communication) pointed out the parallels here with Geertz’s analysis of objections to the study of personality (1960, pp. 33-62).

9 Another answer comes from Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky (1990) who argue that culture is seen in distinct ways of life, which they define in terms of Mary Douglas’s grid-group analysis. “Group” refers to the extent to which an individual is incorporated into bounded units, while grid refers to the degree to which a person’s behaviors are circumscribed by externally imposed restrictions. Different individuals or states can, in their view, exhibit different degrees of each of the five combinations they identify over time, but viable social units, they argue, are not characterized by the presence of only one culturally defined way of life. While I find much of their analysis of the interaction between values and social structure quite useful, it is less evident to me that making the way of life the unit of analysis provides a guideline that is easy for researchers to use.
units. However, since cultures are not often formally organized entities, we are reluctant to do the same with them. The answer here (as above) is that where we find boundaries will depend on what we are trying to understand. Just as the salience of particular identities varies for people, so does the useful unit of analysis shift for the researcher.

In addition, however, we can turn to operational criteria such as asking people how they identify themselves and others and use self-identification and social consensus about particular cultural groups and their boundaries in an analysis. What this means is that cultural units and boundaries are socially and contextually defined and a research task is, then, to identify the relevant groupings in any context. The fact that people can have multiple identities or that identities can change over time doesn’t invalidate such analysis; it just makes the research more complicated. Good longitudinal data on socially defined cultural identities might be of real importance, for example, in understanding the breakdown of Yugoslavia and its subsequent civil war.

The within-culture variance problem. From a legal point of view, all citizens of a state share certain rights and responsibilities. But what do people of a given culture share? I emphasize a distinctive way of life and a shared worldview. Operationally, this can be ambiguous, for we know that people who consider themselves to be part of a culture often differ in terms of values, lifestyles, political dispositions, religious belief and practice, and ideas about common interests. The key point which LeVine makes is that common understandings of the symbols and representations they communicate means there is not necessarily a problem with within-cultural variation in thought, feeling, and behavior (1984). In addition, Strauss cautions that while there may be some variation in schemas across individuals in the same culture, even those with very similar schemas do not internalize exactly the same things, and that the ambiguity of metaphor produces variation in responses (Strauss, 1992).

Another answer is that what is more crucial than agreement on content is that people share a common identity, although this still leaves open the question of different degrees of identification and differences in the actions people are willing to undertake in the name of that identity. Shared identities mean that people see themselves as similar to some people and different from others and are open to potential mobilization on the basis of these differences. Emphasis on self-identification stresses, once again, that the relevant critical aspects of cultural similarity and difference are defined in particular political contexts. It also points to beliefs about what people believe they share, which may be at odds with reality. It is probably the case that people’s perceptions of cultural unity take the form of a regression to the mean in which widely accepted norms are seen as more shared than they in fact are. In this dynamic, ingroup conformity pressures will both lead

Frankel (personal communication) suggests it is useful to think of culture as a reservoir from which each person dips a different portion, rather than as an invariant pattern.
people to selectively perceive greater within-group homogeneity on critical characteristics than actually exists and to generate greater actual homogeneity and group conformity in situations where perceived threats to the culture are great.

The “culture is everything so is it anything?” problem. Some uses of the concept of culture, such as some of the early work on national character, defined culture so broadly as to include society, personality, values, and institutions. In fact, nothing was excluded.11 The tendency to use a concept like culture very broadly was also encouraged by early writers who emphasized culture as a way of understanding the social integration of a society. This perspective, probably clearest in functional theory such as British social anthropology, would use culture to refer to both distinct elements of social organization and to the “fit” between different parts of a cultural system and the integration of the whole. Some more recent cultural analyses suffer from the same problem, as culture becomes a master, all-encompassing, yet often undefined, phenomenon. The problem here isn’t the concept of culture but the way it is used. As noted above, current anthropological investigations focus on culture as meaning systems and distinct from social structure, and behavior. D’Andrade makes this particularly clear in his description of culture “as consisting of learned systems of meaning, communicated by means of natural language and other symbol systems, having representational, directive, and affective function, and capable of creating cultural entities and particular senses of reality. Through these systems of meaning, groups of people adapt to their environment and structure interpersonal activities” (1984, p. 116).

The “how does culture work” problem. When we ask “how culture works,” we are really concerned with two different questions: (1) how does the organization of any particular culture produce the specific effects attributed to it? and (2) why are appeals to cultural identity so powerful that people are willing to take high risks in its name? The first is about the organization of culture and the second about its mobilizing power.

Any theory which gives culture a central explanatory role must specify how the effects attributed to culture come about (Bohannan, 1995). It’s not good enough to simply say, “They did it because they’re Chinese.” While this statement implies that non-Chinese people (such as the Japanese or Americans) would have behaved differently, adding a clause to this effect doesn’t really enhance the explanation a great deal. Only when one says why Chinese are likely to behave differently from how Americans behave (in what is presumed to be an equivalent situation), do we begin to have an adequate explanation. Anthropology, one might say, consists of many such “middle-range” theories which answer questions about the effects of culture on social action.

11 Pye says that national character analyses tended to treat “personality and culture as opposite sides of the same coin. Culture for them was the generalized personality of a people, in the sense that the modal personality of a people was their culture, and thus culture and personality were essentially identical factors shaping behavior” (1991, p. 404).
Any adequate explanation of how culture works has to pay some attention to how it is learned and reinforced (Strauss, 1992; D’Andrade, 1992). Learning from the first days of life, (Stern 1985) provides clear messages about appropriate behavior and contains both affective and cognitive content. Just as important, learning and reinforcement involve practice during which a person (child or adult) masters certain behaviors and often infuses them with emotional significance. Beatrice Whiting (1980) describes the importance of the placement of individuals in particular contexts, for example, girls take care of younger siblings more than boys and boys are more likely to take care of animals in all the cultures for which she has data. In these contexts a person learns what she calls “mundane” behaviors, those culturally sanctioned daily actions and values which serve them throughout life.

Social experiences within institutions such as schools, religious organizations, kin groups, and later in work and leisure settings all provide cultural messages about values and expectations which are selectively reinforced. It certainly is the case that the messages from different domains are not always fully consistent. Sometimes there is a difference in emphasis, at others an outright contradiction; peer groups and families, for example, don’t necessarily give adolescents the same messages. However, what is most important from a cultural perspective are the beliefs, customs, rituals, behaviors, expectations, and motives which are internalized by individuals and widely shared among people in a culture. Culture is about what is held in common and regularly reinforced: there is a reward for “getting it right” and a cost—which most people are willing to pay at times—for not doing so. Finally, it should be noted that cultural learning is not necessarily very conscious at all, for it occurs when individuals in institutional roles pass on culturally sanctioned beliefs and behaviors to others. Through these experiences culture prepares people to make sense of—to interpret—the world and act “effectively” in it.

The power of culture—the ability to mobilize action in its name—requires explanation, for it is not always the case that people can or will exhibit solidarity around cultural identity just because a leader (or anyone else) asserts that there is an external threat. Various theories of ethnocentrism and ethnic identity (LeVine & Campbell, 1973; Ross & Campbell, 1989) provide answers to this question. For example, realistic group conflict theory (LeVine & Campbell, 1973; Taylor & Moghaddam, 1987) emphasizes cost-benefit calculations; sociobiological theory (a variation on cost-benefit analysis) stresses the transmission of genes; social identity theory points to the link between social belongingness and self-esteem; and psychocultural identity theory (Ross, 1995) locates group loyalty in early attachments. Each of these, although in very different ways, shares three core, often implicit key propositions: the ability of cultural groups to meet many basic needs; the importance of social connectedness and links to others both living and dead; and the interdependence of individual and group identity.
Cultural mobilization builds on individual fears and perceived threats consistent with internalized worldviews and is regularly reinforced through high ingroup interaction and emotional solidarity. Such worldviews are expressed in daily experiences as well as significant ceremonial and ritual events which effectively restate and renew support for a group’s core values and the need for solidarity in the face of external foes (Kertzer, 1988). In potentially threatening situations, the ability of a group to organize collective action, which can range from unified voting to political demonstrations and violent action, is tied to the plausibility of a worldview’s explanation of a situation. The resonance between the definition of a situation and group-based action is often not explicit, as Cohen’s analysis points out. Nonetheless it is effective when group members act in unified ways in the face of perceived threats.

CULTURE AND ETHNIC CONFLICT

Here I wish to turn from a general discussion of the relevance of culture for the study of political psychology to the specific question of the role of culture in the analysis of ethnic conflict. The power of cultural models of behavior and their value for the development of a comparative (and cross-cultural) political psychology lies in their specification of cross-level links to explain collective behavior through individual-level learning mechanisms and the internalization of worldviews (Ross, forthcoming c). The linkage between individual and group dynamics is seen in shared rituals and symbols of identity which emphasize a group’s distinctiveness even where “objectively defined” intragroup variation may be high. This linkage also draws our attention to the social reinforcement of shared worldviews and the distinctive ways of life. These dynamics are especially relevant to considering the mobilization of group identity in ethnic conflict, a good account of which must explain why individuals behave as they do, how behaviors are learned, and why and how group loyalty matters. I try to emphasize these points below.

Ethnic conflict is an ideal question for comparative analysis. Few modern states are ethnically homogeneous, and as Gurr (1993) has shown, conflicts in which ethnicity is a central defining dimension are prevalent in all parts of the contemporary world. He counts 233 politically significant ethnic conflicts in the world from 1945 to 1989. Furthermore, as Huntington (1993) argues, conflicts rooted in cultural differences are likely to be even more common in the post-Cold War world. While ethnic conflict is widespread, it is not at all times equally virulent. Why some societies and certain groups handle ethnic conflicts more constructively than others, I suggest, is an important question for cross-cultural political psychology.

Conflicts between ethnic groups are redefined in significant ways over time. A label, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, may not shift, although key goals
of the parties and their interactions with each other may change in fundamental ways. Equally important for comparative analysis is that some intergroup situations are best characterized as cooperative when relations between the different groups are more or less peaceful and overt intergroup disputes are not a fact of daily life. Both conflict and cooperation need to be explained (Ross, forthcoming a; Worchel, Coutant-Sasic, & Wong, 1993). Huntington, for example, writes about what he sees as the high potential for conflict between cultural groups, but at the same time we need to consider situations where cultural differences are great but where conflict is less than we might expect on the basis of these differences alone. In this regard, the present U.S.-Japan relationship is interesting in that while there are clearly tensions and differences—some of which have been explained in cultural terms (Johnson, 1991)—the level of overt conflict is modest, and overall one would have to describe the relationship for some time as more cooperative than conflictual.

The question of why societies differ in their levels and forms of conflict is one which I have examined at length using a worldwide sample of 90 preindustrial societies (Ross, 1993a). The data show strong relationships between conflict levels and psychocultural dispositions, orientations toward the self and others acquired early in life. In particular, violent conflict is much more likely in societies in which socialization lacks warmth and affection, is harsh, and where male gender identity conflict is high. These psychocultural practices, I argue, promote interpretations of the world as an uncertain place where potential enemies are ready to attack at any time. At the same time, while psychocultural interpretations predispose a group toward high or low conflict, its social and political structure is critical in determining who fights with whom. Cross-cutting social structures which link diverse groups in a society produce an interest in intragroup cooperation and greater conflict with external enemies, whereas weak cross-cutting ties promote narrow group interests and greater intragroup conflict.

The relevance of these findings for ethnic conflict in the contemporary world is that they emphasize the key role of culture in interpreting potential and overt conflicts. Because so many social and political acts are inherently ambiguous, I emphasize the importance of psychocultural interpretations in the frameworks particular groups use to understand a conflict, and the need to address these powerful interpretations in any meaningful effort to manage the conflict constructively (Ross, 1995). Second, the results also make it clear that while we must take seriously the intense fears and threats parties feel, there is also a need to bridge the parties’ often significant, and real, competing interest.12 Addressing competing interests means doing something about inequalities while also building institutions which offer all sides significant benefits and a stake in future arrangements. One

12Donald T. Campbell (personal communication) pointed out that ingroups can fear culturally very similar outgroups, and that in fact many arms races in history were between culturally very similar groups.
hypothesis is that when each side interprets the other’s motives as very hostile, negotiation over interest differences and searches for mutually acceptable constitutional agreements are doomed to failure. For this reason, successful peace-making in the most intransigent situations requires first taking seriously the parties’ culturally rooted interpretations and the fears and threats underlying them (Ross, forthcoming b).

While the analysis of individual groups may show us a good deal about their propensity for intergroup conflict, studying dyads and regional clusters of societies can tell how conflict escalates between rivals. After all, it is not hard to find examples of a group which gets along fairly well with one neighbor and terribly with another. Because we know that conflict systems are highly interactive, comparative analysis of particular dyads—selected for theoretical reasons—can be especially valuable. Perhaps an obvious, but still interesting, comparison would be one which asked why the breakup of Czechoslovakia was so peaceful and that of Yugoslavia so violent. Huntington hypothesizes that conflict will be highest where cultural differences, particularly those defined by religion, are greatest. While that seems consistent with the outcomes here, are there other, perhaps more important factors at work as well?

Raymond Cohen’s investigations into culture and negotiation offer a particularly useful starting point for dyadic analyses. In one study, Cohen (1990) examined Israeli-Egyptian negotiations and in a second (Cohen, 1991), he looked at U.S. negotiations with five different nations: China, Mexico, Egypt, India, and Japan. In both studies, significant differences in cultural styles helped to explain why negotiations between each of the pairs of nations were often so drawn out and not successful. Cohen argues, for example, that intercultural communications such as diplomatic negotiations can be strongly influenced by disparate assumptions, the role of language and non-verbal gestures, and the nature and value of social relationships (1991). He is particularly interested in problems of communication in exchanges between members of what he calls individualistic and interdependent cultures. The different starting points for people in each culture mean that often the same words or gestures are interpreted quite differently if important cultural assumptions (worldviews) are not shared and each culture produces very different negotiation styles, which is a source of tension when the two face each other (1991, pp. 19–32). For example, he argues that the Israeli focus on the legal meaning of particular statement and the Egyptian stress on the importance of context and metaphorical meaning produced a number of communications failures which have led to wars and missed peace-making opportunities.

Culture of Ethnic Conflict

Psychocultural dynamics are central in the development, escalation, and termination of ethnic conflict. Drawing on the previous discussion of culture and
politics, I want to indicate the central role of psychocultural forces in ethnic conflict
and its management.

The cultural context of ethnic politics. Ethnic groups are cultural units whose
distinctiveness is marked by contextually defined features such as language, food,
clothing, religion, and a sense of identity and bolstered by an ideology of common
descent which places emotional significance on real and fictive kin ties (Horowitz,
1985, Chapter 2). The ethnic community, as Horowitz writes, is the family writ
large; membership in the family separates insiders and outsiders. Some ethnic
communities are formally organized as political units (such as states or autonomous
regions in larger states) which make collective decisions and enforce ingroup rules
on members. Often, however, in the contemporary world authority in ethnic
communities is more informal but still can exert significant pressures over the
behavior of group members, especially during periods of stress.

While the core of an ethnic group and consensus concerning who is part of the
group is often high, a group’s outer edges and the boundaries between one group
and another are often fuzzy (Barth, 1969). In politics such as the former U.S.S.R.,
which require citizens to carry internal passports identifying one’s nationality, there
are frequently multiple criteria for classifying a person, allowing for a movement
across boundaries which follows systematic patterns (Karklins, 1986). Similarly,
ethnic categories (and who is put in them) vary over time and context, reinforcing
the importance of the subjective and changing character of ethnicity and possibili-
ties for manipulating identity politically. In short, while cultural features distin-
guish one group from another, political dynamics are often central in deciding the
relative importance of particular cultural features in any time and place. Political
processes are crucial to shaping how and when cultural differences are emphasized.
Culture, in this sense, does not cause conflict directly, but political groups and
leaders use culture to mobilize followers in their pursuit of political goals.

Tightening the boundaries and defining action. Perceived threat frequently
leads to calls for tightening the boundaries between a group and all outsiders (not
just stated enemies). Groups become more careful to monitor how members interact
with outgroups and there is sometimes an increase in sanctioning of interpersonal
interactions with outgroups, exchanges across boundaries, and even expressions of
positive feeling for members of other groups. The most extreme form—unfortu-
nately not uncommon— involves ethnic purification in which groups seek to
remove any traces of connectedness or interaction with the enemy. This often takes
symbolic forms such as removing foreign words from the language or books from
libraries and bookstores or rewriting history to emphasize a lack of connectedness
between two groups which have shared the same territory for long periods of time
(Tambiah, 1986). Finally, ethnic cleansing and genocide involve the removal and
killing of any members of the outgroup (as well as ingroup members about whom
one has “doubts.”)

In escalating conflicts, groups frequently impose tests on their members
requiring them to make public commitment to the group’s cause, such as partici-
patron in group rituals which reaffirm the correctness of the group’s position—taking an oath, wearing particular items of clothing, or giving up items of high value such as money or choice items of food. In such rituals, the group may focus particular emotional attention on individuals who in the past might have been critical of the group’s position or even outsiders who support the group’s cause as a way of emphasizing the righteousness of their cause.

Interpreting events. Ethnicity is not equally important everywhere as a marker of social position, as a determiner of political rights and privileges, or as a line of political cleavage. Where it is significant, however, ethnicity provides a culturally based framework to explain the motives and actions of others, particularly in situations where the actions themselves are highly ambiguous. Ethnic (cultural) frameworks offer worldviews which interpret inherently complicated and potentially puzzling actions to make sense of them and to guide appropriate responses. The frameworks (or schemas) of particular interest here are those marked by relatively high ingroup homogeneity because they are learned within the ethnic community and socially reinforced through the relatively homogeneous ethnic networks in which many people spend much of their lives. Sharing and reinforcing interpretations increases as stress increases in conflict situations, meaning that people have both less access to alternative interpretations and, more important, little social incentive to take seriously those they encounter.

At the core of psychocultural interpretations are the stories of the past and present which explain why an enemy behaves as it does and which justify a strong response from one’s own group. Powerful metaphors help groups define the threats they face. Akenson (1992), for example, offers a masterful account of how numbers of politically attuned Northern Irish Protestants, South African Afrikaners, and Israeli Jews found great political meaning in the idea of the sacred covenant from the Biblical story of Exodus. The metaphor of the sacred covenant explains their vulnerable and precarious situation in the world but also provides a course of action which tightens ingroups resolve in the face of widespread external opposition. Such worldviews, he argues, are highly defended and difficult to change.

A similar powerful metaphor is found in what Volkan calls a chosen trauma, “an event that causes a large group to feel helpless and victimized by another group” (1991, p. 13). In his writing, Volkan gives many examples of such events, which clearly would include 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. If a group feels too humiliated, angry, or helpless to mourn the losses suffered in the trauma, he suggests that it then incorporates the emotional meaning of the traumatic event into its identity and passes on the emotional and symbolic meaning from generation to generation. The flip side is the chosen glory, in which a group perceives triumph over the enemy; this is seen clearly in the Northern Irish Protestant celebration of the Battle of the Boyne in 1689 every July 12 (Cecil, 1993). In escalating ethnic conflicts, the key metaphors, such as those in the chosen trauma or glory serve both as a rallying point...
and as a way to make sense of events which evoke deep fears and threats to existence (Horowitz, 1985; Kelman, 1978; 1987).

Cultural mobilization: Culture offers contextually defined resources for political organization and mobilization in ethnic conflicts, as discussed above. Its ideology, for example, provides an explicit statement of what is often implicit in a group’s worldview. While there is certainly great variability in the form and content of ideological statements, three politically critical themes which occur over and over in ethnic confrontation are the following: each side’s feeling of relative isolation “People don’t know what it is like to be an X” and “We are alone in the world”; expression of vulnerability, “Unless we take extraordinary steps our existence is precarious”; and a sense that the group constitutes the chosen people who will survive and triumph.13

The dynamics of increasing polarization involve mechanisms of selective emphasis on past events and selective perception of current ones, both of which are facilitated by the social and emotional separation between the group and others. In the creation of a politically acceptable past, the selective use of events is perhaps more important than outright distortions (Tambiah, 1986). It is not necessarily what groups get wrong that is as important as what they ignore. In fact, outside observers are often struck at how little groups in conflict (even those living in the same small place such as Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland) know about each other, and how strikingly different are the accounts of the conflict each side provides—not so much because of outright disagreements but because each highlights such different events.

Selective perception is maintained when each cultural group, emphasizing its status as a vulnerable minority, is unable to empathize with the other side’s past losses and present fears (Volkan, 1993; White, 1984). Ingroup accounts are selective but powerful, for they resonate with what people have experienced and the way they have come to understand the past. Old wounds don’t heal when (small) slights continue to keep them festering. The construction of powerful metaphors to symbolize a group’s plight, the development of rituals of unity, and the destruction of social ties between groups all inhibit efforts to bridge differences and make further one-sided recounting of the conflict more likely.

Culture and ethnic peacemaking: If we take seriously the profoundly cultural nature of ethnic conflict, what are the prospects for peace-making between two (or more) groups who have as basic a fear of and anger toward each other as the psychocultural dynamics described above suggest? Is it realistic to think that Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland or Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka can ever live together more peacefully than they have in the past 20 years?

13LeVine and Campbell (1972, p. 12) offer a more complete list of dimensions of ethnocentrism, each of which can be, and often is, used to build a group’s culturally grounded ideological rationales for hostility toward outgroups.
The first point to make is that there are many examples of situations where once extremely hostile ethnic groups have come to live side by side in more peaceful ways. The once hostile peoples of France and Germany have developed a new culture of European cooperation since the Second World War, which has not ended all differences between the former adversaries, but created a much less threatening, nonviolent way of dealing with differences. Similarly, ethnic groups in Nigeria which fought a bitter civil war a generation ago have achieved significant reconciliation. Such examples make it irresponsible and factually irrelevant to write off ethnic conflict as inevitable and unmanageable.

Emphasizing the cultural dimensions of ethnic conflict is at odds with the hypothesis that a first step to resolving serious group difference lies in finding the right formula (i.e., constitution) to meet the core interests of each side. At best, such institutional arrangements might follow a much more complicated psychocultural process in which the groups come to believe that such arrangements are possible. We have seen this at work in a number of recent examples of relatively successful ethnic conflict management, such as South Africa and the Middle East.

The theories of psychoanalysts like Volkan and cultural anthropologists like Geertz (1973a) agree that a natural starting point is making sense of the stories parties in a conflict tell. Taking seriously a group's worldview does not mean agreeing with it but rather trying to understand why a group has come to see the world as it does, the consequences of the view it holds, and what would have to happen for it to change its current understanding. There is no doubt that third parties can be especially important in this process, but the key here is getting the parties themselves to approach each other's accounts in ways that permit them to conceptualize future arrangements which are potentially more satisfactory than past ones. Volkan (1988, 1993) argues that in the most intense conflicts, the inability to mourn past losses means that groups continue to fixate on the past. Cultural responses, such as building monuments, holding public rituals, and other events which help groups acknowledge past suffering and mourn real losses, are prerequisites to developing new relationships with old enemies.

14 For about five years now I have been asking groups for examples of more or less successful ethnic conflict management. My not very systematic list has produced several dozen cases, most of which I knew nothing about before they were presented to me. I would appreciate any examples readers might care to send.

15 Kelman’s list of prerequisites (1978, pp. 176–185) for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement is as useful a list of beliefs as I can imagine: (1) Each side must acquire some insight into the perspectives of the other; (2) Each side must be persuaded that there is someone to talk to on the other side and something to talk about; (3) Each side must be able to distinguish between the dreams and the operational programs of the other side; (4) Each side must be persuaded that mutual concessions will create a new situation, setting a process of change into motion; (5) Each side must be persuaded that structural changes, conducive to a stable peace, have taken place or will take place in the leadership of the other side, and (6) Each side must sense a responsiveness to its human concerns and psychological needs on the part of the adversary.
CONCLUSION

This article has emphasized the relevance of culture to political psychology, pointing out its importance in 1) framing the context in which politics take place, 2) linking individual and cultural identities, 3) defining the boundaries between groups and organizing actions within and between them, 4) providing a framework for interpreting the actions and motives of others, and 5) offering resources for political organization and mobilization. These general points were illustrated through a discussion of the dynamics of ethnic conflict and its management.

A great part of the challenge in organizing my thoughts on these questions grows out of the very real tension between context-specific analysis and the emphasis on universal dynamics found in all human communities, which characterizes cross-cultural psychology. I have tried to illustrate how a synthesis of elements of both the particularisms of contextual analysis and the generalizations of cross-cultural psychology offer richer explanations than either might provide alone. The key is that underlying thick descriptions of single cultures are what an earlier generation of anthropologists called “the psychic unity of mankind,” referring to the deep structural similarities of all cultures which “comprise a set of universal cultural patterns, which, in interactions with a common biological heritage and common features of social interaction, creates a generic human mind.” (Spiro, 1984, p. 335). These universals in psychological processes, Spiro argues, are what make us human (Spiro, 1987), and they result in such politically relevant dynamics as attachment, group formation, and hierarchy. All human communities, for example, are forced to deal with questions of order, authority, resource distribution, and conflict and its management. In the analysis of ethnic conflict one clearly must pay attention to the dynamics of ingroup and outgroup formation and the escalation of hostility during periods of stress.

At the same time, as Laitin argues, thick descriptions of symbolic systems become useful in understanding cultural preferences without the tautology of simply claiming that they can be derived from the behavior of actors assumed to be rational (1986). Such detailed analysis not only describes worldviews but also can render them plausible through a rich consideration of the origin, development, and maintenance of people’s interpretations of their social and political worlds. In an analysis of ethnic conflict, for example, such an approach would account for the particular fears and threats competing groups perceive through a focus on the meaning of particular events and metaphors central to the conflict. Only through such detailed understanding might third parties move not only toward understanding “what a conflict is really about” but also toward being able to do something about it.

A complex problem such as the dynamics of ethnocentrism and ethnic conflict is likely to benefit from a better understanding of the psychological dynamics underlying cultural processes. After all, ethnic mobilization begins with perceptions of group differences rooted in shared cultural assumptions and is strengthened
by dense within-group social interaction. Cultural mechanisms provide selective reinforcement to group members for group-supportive behaviors and shared interpretations of the world that help account for the intensity of ethnic conflicts for participants which is, at the same time, generally puzzling outsiders.

The task of building a field of cross-cultural political psychology, in this view, will rise or fall on the extent to which analysis can link the rich descriptions of contextually specific cultural understandings with the identification of psychologically general processes underlying culturally specific beliefs and behaviors. Psychocultural approaches to politics promise to broaden our comparative understanding of widespread (and probably universal) processes such as political participation, order and rebellion, authority and its legitimation, and conflict and its management.

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