

## The culture of conflict and conflict management: Linking societal and dispute level theories\*

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**Abstract.** Two very different kinds of questions are addressed in studies of political conflict. Comparison of societies leads to explanations for differences in kinds and levels of conflict behavior, the ways in which conflicts are played out, and the mechanisms for dispute settlement which are utilized when conflict occurs. Analysis of individual disputes tries to explain why particular conflicts take the course they do. This paper seeks to link both kinds of questions about conflict, spelling out their mutual relevance for explaining societal differences, and for suggesting fruitful ways to think about the dynamics of dispute resolution in the context of intense ethnic conflict. Broad comparative analysis can offer an appropriate framework for understanding particular disputes, and the specific argument that both the concrete interests and psycho-cultural interpretations of the disputants affect conflict behavior is illustrated using the cross-cultural framework to discuss conflict in Northern Ireland.

### Overview

Two very different kinds of questions are addressed in studies of political conflict. Comparison of societies leads to explanations of differences in kinds and levels of conflict behavior, the ways in which conflicts are played out, and the mechanisms for dispute settlement which are utilized when conflict occurs (Ross 1986 a). Analysis of individual disputes tries to explain why particular conflicts take the course they do (Swartz 1966; Swartz, Turner and Tuden 1968). Both kinds of questions are important, and answers to each are needed for a full understanding of conflict behavior. This paper seeks to address both kinds of questions about conflict, spelling out their mutual relevance for explaining societal differences, for considering conflict in particular communities, and for suggesting fruitful ways to think about the dynamics of dispute resolution in the context of intense ethnic conflict. A crucial part of my argument is that broad comparative analysis can offer an appropriate framework for understanding particular disputes. The general argument is illustrated using the framework I developed studying political conflict and violence cross-culturally to understand the dynamics of ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland.

I begin with the proposition that conflict is a collective process, and use the concept of culture to develop the common threads between the societal and dispute level ques-

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