analyses at each level can inform the other. Societal level analyses can make researchers more sensitive to general ways in which individual disputes resemble each other, while dispute level analyses can suggest more nuanced questions to ask in comparative, societal-level research. Most important, there are substantive areas, such as ethnic and racial conflict where it is crucial to ask questions on both levels and to ask how the answers intersect. Why are some societies apparently more prone than others to severe ethnic conflicts, and are there important differences in the ways in which ethnic conflicts unfold in each case?

Three steps are involved in the analysis here which reflects my own interest in cross-level linkage and the preliminary state of my thinking in this area: (1) development of societal-level theory through a quantitative cross-cultural approach; (2) brief examination of the theory through case studies of particular societies; and (3) application of the societal level theory's framework to dispute level questions, using as a case a current project I am working on with Prof. Donald Campbell, that of ethnocentric conflict (Ross and Campbell 1989). Taking the case of Northern Ireland, I want to suggest how plausible and how partial so many alternative explanations for the conflict there are, and how because each partial view explains the conflict so differently it leads to very different proposals for ethnic conflict resolution.

1 Why are some societies more conflictual than others?

In reviewing existing anthropological and political studies of conflict two things are striking: the rarity of broad based comparative tests of most theories, and the absence of studies juxtaposing alternative explanations for conflict behavior (see Knauft 1987 for an exception). As a result, existing theories are rarely at odds with the data, in great part because they are chosen after the data are known. At the same time, what is missing is the examination of a favored theory in a new setting, or the comparison of a theory with a plausible rival one. Consequently, a major task I set for myself in this area was the systematic testing of alternative theories of conflict and violence in a comparative context – that of small scale, preindustrial societies (Ross 1986a).

In attempting to understand political conflict, I paid particular attention to competing explanations which give a primary role to social structural features of a society versus those which emphasize the psychocultural dispositions of its members. Proponents of social structural theories of conflict see the social, economic, or political structure of a society as crucial in creating interests which shape the organization and level of conflict (Axelrod 1984; Ferguson 1984). There is a great range, however, in the particular social structural elements which are identified as central to the dynamics of conflict, including cross-cutting ties based on marriage, residence, trade, or formal groups; the existence and strength of organized coresident male kin who undertake joint action; polygyny; socioeconomic complexity; and political complexity. Psychocultural theories of conflict identify very different roots of conflict behavior, empha-