Cultures of War

Population Characteristics and State Hostility

Wyatt Hoffman

Truman State University

Kirksville, Missouri

wah5154@truman.edu

One of the persistent challenges facing international relations scholars is understanding

how the characteristics of a country's people and culture affect the decisions and actions of its

government. At some level, governments reflect the nature of the people they are composed of,

so what characteristics of those people are important in shaping decisions of war and peace?

Many have attempted to argue that different cultures and values are sources of conflict between

states. I believe that rather than being the reasons states go to war, culture has a more complex

relationship with conflict.

The beliefs of the actors involved impact aspects of the bargaining process, including the

perceptions of the goals and intentions of opposing states, expectations of the likelihood that an

opposing state will attack, and the willingness to cooperate and make concessions. If the U.S.

has a dispute with Canada, the leaders of both countries will realize that there is no reason to fear

armed conflict, and will view each other in a cooperative light. An identical dispute with Iran,

however, would appear very different. Leaders on both sides will view each other with animosity, will suspect the claimed intentions of the other, and will likely view the situation in

in-group, out-group terms. As a result, the former dispute will probably be resolved quickly and

peacefully, while the latter may escalate to higher levels of confrontation. In some cases the expectation of conflict with another country may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is the exact mechanism behind preventative or preemptive warfare, and it's possible that many conflicts occur from these attacks that might not have occurred otherwise.

The purpose of my study is to understand the specific characteristics of a population that

shape relations with other states. In order to do this, I use results from World Value Surveys that

measure the percentage of a population holding various views on topics ranging from religion

and family to the role of the government. I identify specific questions that I think are indicative

of the propensity a culture has for conflict, and see how these affect the probability of escalation

over a dispute. First I will have a brief overview of existing research in this field. Then after a

detailed description of my study and the cultural indicators I use, I will analyze these indicators

using linear regression. Finally, I will make some recommendations for the direction of future

research in the field.

Literature Review

Research on culture and international conflict has received considerable attention since

Samuel Huntington's (1996) book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

In this book, Huntington argues that the world can be divided into a handful of major competing

civilizations, including Western, Latin American, Orthodox, Sinic, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and

Japanese civilizations. These civilizations are defined by common religion, language, history,

and culture. In the post-Cold War international system, Huntington argued states will view these

civilization memberships as what distinguishes them from other states. The primary location of

conflicts of the future will be the fault lines between these various civilizations. While

Huntington provides some quantitative support, his book is largely qualitative and predictive in

nature.

Huntington's work directly and indirectly shaped much of the research that has examined

culture. As a result, there has been a tendency for these studies to focus on conflict occurrence

rather than escalation, as well as on broader cultural variables such as Huntington's civilization

membership. Many studies were direct responses to Huntington, and they have largely refuted

various parts of his theory. Some of these have simply examined the frequency of interstate war

between states of different civilizations, comparing the Cold War and post-Cold War periods.

Russet et al. (2000) provided one of the earlier empirical tests to Huntington's thesis.

Examining interstate disputes between 1950 and 1992, they first used a dichotomous variable for

whether or not states in a dyad were from the same civilization to test if the outbreak of

militarized interstate dispute was more likely. They also tested specifically if dyads containing

one Western and one Islamic state were more likely to conflict. Their findings were that disputes

along civilizational fault lines were no more common than other interstate disputes, and that in

fact some civilizations experienced more frequent conflict internally than with other

civilizations. There was also no support for an inordinate amount of conflict between the West

and the Middle East.

Jonathan Fox (2002) also used Huntington's variable of civilization membership to test

several components of his hypothesis. He tested whether minorities within states that are from

different ethnic groups are more likely to conflict since the end of the Cold War. Not only did he

find that there was no evidence of a rise in conflicts between groups from different civilizations,

but further that there have not been a disproportionate number of conflicts between Western

civilization and Islamic or Sinic civilizations as Huntington predicted.

Henderson and Tucker (2001) tested the effect of civilization membership on the

incidence of interstate war, focusing specifically on the time frame of Huntington's predictions

by comparing the pre-Cold War, Cold War, and post-Cold War periods. They found that

contrary to Huntington's assertions, states were more likely before the Cold War to conflict if

they were from the same civilization, and that in the post-Cold War period there was no

significant impact of civilization membership.

One of the most extensive tests of Huntington's work came from Andrej Tusicinsy

(2004), who used a unit of analysis of conflict-years to determine if certain periods of time

featured more inter-civilizational conflict. He found no support for an effect of culture on the

duration of conflict. Tusicinsy did, however, find some support for the civilization approach.

When comparing the different time periods he found that since World War two, the number of

inter-civilization conflict years has increased, but this was unaffected by the end of the Cold

War. Further, there is a lower probability for conflicts within civilizations to escalate to war in

the post-Cold War period than during the Cold War.

The precedents that Huntington set have limited the examination of other aspects of

culture, as well as its impact on escalation. There is also a lack of theoretical explanation for

why there is conflict within the same civilizations or cultures. My research attempts to correct

these tendencies by breaking down cultural variables into specific beliefs that influence the

decision making process during a conflict. The nuance of this approach will allow me to

determine exactly what it is about different cultures that causes conflict, rather than just

examining broad categories of states.

There has been a second predominant course of the extant research on culture. This has

been the study of ethnic and religious violence, often at the intrastate level. Jonathan Fox (2004)

conducted a series of studies on religious conflict within states. He looked at cases of revolution,

ethnic war, and genocide/politicide, and examined if membership in different religions caused

the intensity of these conflicts to increase. Three measures of intensity were used, including

combatant deaths, fatalities, and the portion of the country affected by the violence. His results

showed that while the frequency of religious conflict has increased less that of non-religious

conflict since the Cold War, conflicts between groups of different religions were more intense.

While the original tenets of Huntington's theory have largely been dismissed, there have

been some advancements made in this research. First, it has been found repeatedly that the broad

categories of civilizations used are ineffective in prediction conflict. Second, there is support for

the idea that cultural and ethnic differences do contribute to violence, at least at the intrastate

level. What is desperately needed is a break-away from Huntington view of culture and conflict.

There appears to be enough evidence for me to justify a more in-depth look at cultural

differences, and I believe the approach I take will avoid some of the barriers previous research

has identified.

Theory/Methodology

Huntington and others argued that these cultural differences are causes of conflict.

Clashing values, languages, and religions are sources of animosity between groups. I disagree

with this theoretical basis. My theory is that culture does not cause conflict, but rather influences

the conflict process by increasing or decreasing the chance that confrontations escalate. Various

characteristics of a population, such as the degree of national pride and the level of trust toward

others, likely factor into the bargaining process in disputes between nations. Two states may not

go to war simply because they have different cultures, but when they do have a dispute over

some issue it will be much more likely to result in conflict.

My study intends to examine what I have identified as the most important characteristics

of a population in determining its propensity for violence. I will look at how these

characteristics affect the probability that a conflict between two states will escalate to armed

conflict.

Nationalism has been well-established as a historical cause of conflict between states. It

is widely identified as one of the major contributing factors to the outbreak and escalation of

World War II. Populations that are highly nationalistic view their own county's goals as more

important that other countries, and are more willing to use force to accomplish those goals.

When the leaders of nationalistic states face external threats, they will more commonly prioritize

the interests of their own population over the desire to maintain peace. In order to examine the

strength of nationalism in a culture, I will create an index based on the level of national pride in a

country, the people's confidence in their military, and the people's willingness to fight for their

country. I believe that a country with a high degree of these factors will be more likely to escalate its conflicts with other nations. Thus, my first hypothesis is:

**H1: The higher the combined index of nationalism in a state, the more likely an instance of MID will escalate to higher levels of conflict.**

The question of how much the individual trusts other people will be used as a simple

measure of cooperation. Countries that have very trusting people will be more likely to work

with others for a peaceful resolution to problems. Individuals in the governments of these

countries will also be less suspicious of the motives of other states, so they will likely have less

fear that they will be attacked or taken advantage of. In the bargaining process of disputes, these

countries will usually see conflict as a last resort and are more willing to make concessions to the

other country to keep the peace. Finally, high levels of trust inhibit escalation because states are

more likely to believe their opponents will be willing to negotiate and make concessions, so they

will be much less likely to launch preemptive strikes to try and cripple their opponent early. My

second hypothesis is the following:

**H2: The higher the level of trust in a state, the less likely an instance of MID will escalate to higher levels of conflict.**

Operationalization

I analyzed non-directed dyads that have had an instance of militarized interstate dispute (MID) between 1980 and 2001. All of my data for my dependent and control variables will come from the Correlates of War dataset. My dependent variable of MID escalation is measured on a scale of one to five. One is equal to no militarized action; two is threat to use force; three is display of force; four is use of force; and five is full-scale war. I looked at both the overall level of hostility in the MID as well as the hostility of individual states.

My independent variables are based on survey responses taken by World Value Surveys.

The dates of the surveys range from 1981 to 2002, and I will only use results for states within

five years of the survey date. The index for nationalism is created by taking the 'positive' answer for three questions and adding together the proportions for a range of 0 to 3. The three questions I use for my nationalism index are how willing are you to fight for your country; how much pride do you have in your nationality; and how much confidence do you have in your country's armed forces. These questions each reflect a slightly different aspect of national pride, and my belief is that the combined index will be a good measure to differentiate states with a high degree of nationalism from those with a low degree of nationalism. Finally the trust index will be based on the question of how much trust do you have in other people, with each state ranging from 0 to 1 on the index.

Relative power will be measured as the CINC score of a state divided by the sum of the CINC scores for both states in the dyad. Regime type will be controlled for with a dichotomous variable for joint democracy based on Polity IV data. If an individual state has a higher democratic than autocratic value, it will be a 'democracy,' and if both states are democratic, the dyad will have a score of 1 (compared to 0 for mixed regimes or autocratic states). Finally, contiguity will be controlled for by simply using the Correlates of War scale of 1 to 5 for geographic contiguity.

Analysis

My explanatory variables were consistently insignificant in predicting the dyadic level of hostility. Part of the problem I found was that there was very little variation in dyadic hostility—almost every single MID had a hostility level of 3 or 4 with few instances of war or low level hostility. To remedy this, I changed the focus to the monadic level, using the state indices to predict monadic hostility. In order to control for the dyadic level hostility, I included a variable in the models for the opposing state's hostility level.

Trust

I examined the impact of the level of trust of a state's population on its hostility level in conflicts. The full model including level of trust, relative power, geographic contiguity, joint democracy, and hostility level of the opposing state in the dyad. All variables in this model proved to be significant except trust, which had a P-value of 0.158. When the control variable for joint democracy was removed, trust became significant at the 0.017 level (See Table 1). Interestingly, trust had a positive coefficient in this model, indicating that as the level of trust in State A increased it was more likely to use higher levels of violence.

**Table 1**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| Trust | 0.3650  (0.158) | 0.6135  (0.017)\* |
| Relative Power | 0.7564  (0.001)\* | 0.8150  (0.000)\* |
| Contiguity | -0.0964  (0.001)\* | -0.0937  (0.003)\* |
| Joint Democracy | -0.5219  (0.000)\* | N/A |
| State B Hostility | -0.3301  (0.000)\* | -0.3164  (0.000)\* |
| R2 value | 25.5% | 21.7% |

\* significant at 0.05 level

These findings lead me to reject my first hypothesis. There is some evidence that trust plays a role in hostility level, but it appears to be a more complex relationship than a positive linear one.

Nationalism

The descriptive statistics display a wide degree of variation in the three measures of nationalism and the overall index (See Table 2).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
| Willingness to Fight | 20.3% | 97.8% | 75.5% |
| Confidence in Military | 18.7% | 97.3% | 67.7% |
| National Pride | 60.6% | 98.6% | 85.7% |
| Nationalism Index | 1.109 | 2.926 | 2.290 |

The scatter-plot for hostility level of State A and Nationalism Index of State A shows some evidence of a linear relationship (See Graph 1). Each successive level of hostility is concentrated further to the right on the nationalism spectrum.

**Graph 1**



The full model with nationalism index of state A, relative power, contiguity, joint democracy, and hostility level of state B had all variables as significant at the 0.05 level, except nationalism, which had a significance of 0.089. When the control variable for joint democracy was removed, nationalism became significant with a P-value of 0.029 (See Table 3). There was a slight decrease in R2 adjusted from 21.4% to 20.6% when joint democracy was removed. The nationalism index did have a positive coefficient as predicted (0.4689).

**Table 3**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| Nationalism Index State A | 0.3720  (0.089) | 0.4689  (0.029)\* |
| Relative Power | 1.0716  (0.000)\* | 1.0388  (0.000)\* |
| Contiguity | -0.0623  (0.033)\* | -0.0500  (0.081) |
| State B Hostility | -0.2777  (0.000)\* | -0.2748  (0.000)\* |
| Joint Democracy | -0.2749  (0.046)\* | N/A |
| R2 value | 22.6% | 21.6% |

\* significant at the 0.05 level

I attempted to run these models using a directed-dyad dataset, but found that my primary explanatory variables were no longer significant. This suggests that nationalism is not a good predictor of the initiator state. I also compared the three different measures of nationalism in the index to see if an particular one contained all of the explanatory power. I found that none of the three were as significant as the combined index. Of the three, willingness to fight for the country was the most significant, with a coefficient of 0.7918 and P-value of 0.97 when it replaced the combined index in the full model. Overall, I believe there is enough evidence to accept my second hypothesis; the level of nationalism of a state appears to have some effect in increasing the state's hostility.

Conclusion

This research was important in illuminating the need for a more in-depth examination

into the complex relationships between cultural variables and conflict. There appears to be a relationship between the degree of nationalism in a country and the willingness of the country's leaders to use force in conflict. It makes intuitive sense that it would be more politically acceptable to use military force in countries that Have high levels of national pride, confidence in armed forces, and willingness to fight for the country. The leaders of these states may be quicker to resort to violence to solve problems. There are, however, other explanations for my findings. It could be that these trends in cultural values are a result of a state being in frequent conflict with other states. Frequent high-intensity conflicts may lead the people of a state to be more nationalistic, or to have more confidence in their military's capabilities.

Another possible approach future research may take is exploring the interaction of two state's levels of nationalism or trust. These variables may depend to a degree on the opposing state's culture. I was unable to find support for the dyadic-level models, but with a more extensive dataset or more complex variables this interaction could be explored. Data limitations were one of the greatest challenges I faced. World Value Surveys only cover a limited number of states and years. As a result my dataset was heavily influenced by some states while it completely left out others.

Despite these caveats, this study will hopefully be valuable in furthering the literature on studies of culture and conflict. If there proves to be an impact of culture on conflict escalation then this would be important information for policy-makers and peace keeping efforts around the world. Areas of potential armed conflict could be identified based on an examination of the cultures within a state. While it is likely incredibly difficult to change the culture of a nation, efforts could be taken to identify the problems in a culture prone to violence and find solutions. Nationalism has not disappeared as a phenomenon in states, and it may continue to have significant impacts on global conflict.

Reference

EVS (2011). European Values Study 1981-2008, Longitudinal Data File. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne, Germany, ZA4804 Data File Version 2.0.0 (2011-12-30) DOI:10.4232/1.11005.

Fox, Jonathan. 2004. "Religion and State Failure: An Examination of the Extent and Magnitude of Religious Conflict from 1950 to 1996." *International Political Science Review*. 25: 55-76.

Fox, Jonathan. 2002. "Ethnic Minorities and the Clash of Civilizations: A Quantitative Analysis of Huntington's Thesis." *British Journal of Political Science*. 32: 415-434.

Ghosn, Faten, Glenn Palmer, and Stuart Bremer. 2004. "The MID3 Data Set, 1993–2001: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 21:133-154.

Henderson, Errol and Richard Tucker. 2001. "Clear and Present Strangers: The Clash of Civlizations and International Conflict." *International Studies Quarterly*, 45: 317-338.

Huntington, Samuel. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks.

Russett, Bruce, John Oneal and Michaelene Cox. 2000. "Clash of Civilizations, or Realism and Liberalism Deja Vu? Some Evidence." *Journal of Peace Research*. 37: 583-608.

Tusicinsy, Andrej. 2004. "Civilizational Conflicts: More Frequent, Longer, and Bloodier?" *Journal of Peace Research*, 41: 485-498.

WVS (2009). World Value Survey 1981-2008 official aggregate v.20090902, 2009. World Values Survey Association (www.worldvaluessurvey.org). Aggregate File Producer: ASEP/JDS Data Archive, Madrid, Spain.