# Approaches to ethnic conflict resolution: paradigms and principles

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## Abstract

In the past few decades, the consciousness of the ubiquity of ethnic conflicts and of ethnic diversity has significantly increased. There has been, however, an inability to foresee, adequately explain and resolve ethnic conflicts. This inability is attributed to the preconceived frameworks and paradigms through which the ethnic phenomenon has been understood. Three types of such preconceptions are singled out: the preconception of ethnic groups as pre-modern, the self-conception of the majority group in society as non-ethnic and the often-assumed ''command'' character of the mandate carried out by appointed administrators dealing with minority ethnic groups. These preconceptions have contributed to ineffectiveness of efforts at interethnic conflict resolution in as much as they have excluded the principle of identity recognition, regarded here as a basic metaprinciple of interethnic relations. Techniques of ethnic conflict resolution, such as that of negotiation, can work effectively only when they are governed by this metaprinciple. In this regard, the effectiveness depends also on participation of the state in interethnic conflict resolution, particularly by means of policies of identity recognition. Application of the metaprinciples, however, requires not only an understanding of the circumstances of each particular situation of conflict, but as well, an understanding of the nature of ethnicity, types of ethnic groups, the nature of ethnic identity, the nature of the process of ethnic identity construction and change. Understanding of the nature of nationalism and types of nationalisms is a case in point. Full understanding of the broader nature of the phenomenon of ethnicity is a prerequisite for development of an attitude that would lead to an effective negotiation process between conflicting ethnic groups. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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**Introduction**

Why are social scientists and practitioners so often unable to foresee or predict interethnic conflicts and when they occur unable to find effective ways of their resolution? What follows is an attempt to give an answer to this frequently asked question. I locate the problem in several intellectual paradigms of the era of modernity. First, a brief picture of potential interethnic conflicts at the end of this century is presented. This is followed by a discussion of what I consider to have been prevalent intellectual paradigms which have made the persistence of ethnicity and interethnic conflicts difficult to understand. Thirdly, I take up the issue of the most general principles that guide approaches to ethnic conflict resolution and argue in favor of the principle of identity recognition. I suggest that employment of this principle and the attitudes deriving from this principle can make a more thorough conflict resolution possible. Inversely, the failure to regard the principle of identity recognition frustrates or limits the intervention efforts for interethnic conflict resolution. Identity recognition provides integrity to the process of interethnic negotiation and in difficult cases of negotiation even one or a few actions which symbolically detract from identity recognition will have the effect of undermining the entire process.

The process of interethnic negotiation presupposes not only a specific knowledge of each culturally different group involved in interethnic conflict, but also, and especially, a broader understanding of ethnicity as a social phenomenon that changes or develops over time. Finally, I present an analysis of nationalism as an example of this broader approach to understanding ethnicity. The discussion will use a variety of illustrations of interethnic conflicts in the world, but it will particularly draw examples from Canada's social and historical experience.

**Current interethnic conflicts**

Interethnic conflicts have existed since the dawn of humanity. Yet, it is only recently that scholars and other writers have become conscious and have come to realize how many societies and nation-states in the world are multiethnic and how extensive interethnic conflicts are around the world. In a recent book on "minorities at risk", Ted Gurr (1993) has singled out 233 groups that are "at risk". By this he means groups that in the post-World War II period have become politicized, i.e., have either taken political action on behalf of their collective interests or have experienced economic or political discrimination, or both. Hence they are actually or potentially engaged in interethnic conflict. Each one of these groups is at risk of collective adversity. Of these 233 groups, only 27, or about 12%, have so far no record (in the sources he could find) of political organization, protest, rebellion or other form of intercommunal conflict since 1945. Further, he points out that out of 127 countries in the world that he examined, 75% had at least one, and many had more, highly politicized minorities. Gurr admits that