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Effects of Social Position on Societal Attributions of an Asymmetric Conflict*

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Traditionally, the study of peace and conflict has employed macro explanations such as social structure and state conditions. This article extends the discourse on peace and conflict by considering psychological conditions during a heated social conflict. The focus is on societal attribution, a cognitive process involving shared beliefs about the causes of societal events. The present study examines the effects of social positions on causal attributions in an asymmetric conflict that is taking place in the Philippines on the war-torn island of Mindanao. It was expected that causal attributions of the Mindanao war would differ between Christians and Muslims. Four hundred and thirty Muslims and Christians at Mindanao State University-Marawi stated their degree of agreement on belief statements about perceived intergroup inequality and ranked the three most important causes of the conflict in Mindanao. Results indicated that power inequality between groups is perceived only by the disadvantaged Muslim group, while members in the dominant social position were not sensitized to systemic issues. Findings also indicated intergroup disagreements about the causes of the war. The marginalized Muslims believed that structural problems, namely, displaced and landless Bangsa Moro (Muslim Nation) and loss of rights to self-determination were important origins of the conflict. On the other hand, the dominant Christian group attributed the Mindanao conflict to person-related causes like corruption of the mind and moral fiber, as well as sociocultural discrimination. Implications for attribution theory and the practice of peacemaking in asymmetric conflicts are discussed.

Introduction

Do groups involved in a social conflict see the causes of their conflict from different angles? Our research explores causal attributions of a heated social conflict, by groups that fall on opposite sides of a war. We wanted to find out if members of the low-power group in the Mindanao conflict in the Philippines explained the causes of war using structural attributions, and if members of the more dominant group attributed the conflict to person-based causes.

Typically, conceptual approaches to social peace and conflict take on a macro-lens, using explanatory tools like social structure and state conditions, borrowed from sociology and political science. Our research broadens the discourse on peace and conflict

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and considers the subjectivities of members who are involved in a heated social conflict. We recognize the important role played by subjective phenomena such as collective beliefs in the configuration of social peace and conflict. Subjectivities fuel the intensity and direction of human agency in individuals, as groups of people engage in more macro societal transformations (Bandura, 2001). The subjective meaning of the social conflict, including inferences about causes, may vary between clashing groups. Antagonistic groups' explanations of what causes the war can then be expected to play into conflictual intergroup relationships involving power and hostility.

Causal Attribution of a Social Conflict

We used the social psychological construct of attribution to elucidate how conflict-embedded individuals explain the causes of their war. In psychology, attribution refers to the cognitive process of explaining a phenomenon. An individual's attribution refers to how a person mentally figures out 'What caused X?' or 'Why did X happen?'. In his pioneering essay on attribution, Heider (1944) established that individuals tend to create mental explanations for perceived changes in their social environment. These causal explanations, that is, the linking of a cause to a change, are subjectively constructed and may be inaccurate or biased. Social psychologists developed Heider's innovative ideas, producing a rich collection of psychological literature on attribution theory. State-of-the-art summaries have chronicled developments in attribution research (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Harvey & Weary, 1985; Hewstone, 1990).

Typically, attribution studies have used the individual as the unit of analysis and have employed experimental laboratory methods to produce knowledge on how individuals identify causes of phenomena. However, in order to study causal attributions[1] in a social-conflict setting, such as the conflict in Mindanao, investigators must query members of conflicting groups about the inferences they are drawing with regard to intergroup or societal level units, rather than probing their explanations about the causes of the behavior of another individual. In addition, these large-scale conflicts, by their very nature, cannot be subjected to laboratory procedures and, instead, require quasi-experimental, field-based methods. Such an approach emphasizes contextual influences in cognitive shaping, as the research explores intergroup and societal level cognitions (Billig, 1976; Forgas, 1981; Hewstone & Augoustinos, 1998; Turner et al., 1994).

Hewstone (1989) distinguished four levels of analysis in relation to causal attribution – the intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, and societal. Intergroup attribution is concerned with how group members explain behaviors of the in-group or out-group. A few conflict-related studies compared intergroup attributions between two antagonistic groups. Findings showed that intergroup bias occurs in relation to how conflictual groups evaluate each other's behaviors. Similar patterns arose in comparisons of Israelis and Arabs during the Middle East conflict (Rosenberg & Wolfsfeld, 1977), Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland (Hunter & Stringer, 1999), and Hindus and Muslims in Southern India (Taylor & Jaggi, 1974). However, although contextualized in a conflict-ridden setting, these studies did not inquire about perceived causes of the social conflict, but rather asked

[1] The literature on attribution is most developed along the lines of causal attributions or layperson's explanations of what is causing an event. However, social psychologists have likewise investigated attributional processes related to responsibility attribution, that is, the moral assessment of an act, and trait attribution, that is, personal characteristics that can explain behavior (Heider, 1958; Oskamp, 1991; Ross & Fletcher, 1985).

about how one group perceived itself or the other group.

Our study focuses on societal attribution, a mental process involving how people explain the causes of events in society. Our research on causal attributions of the Mindanao war examines intergroup differences in explaining the causes of their armed conflict. We predict that groups holding different power positions in a conflict would endorse different ideas about the causes of their intergroup war.

Perceiver's Social Position and Causal Attributions

The literature on causal attribution showed that psychological and sociological views bifurcate in relation to categories of attribution (Fox & Ferri, 1992). Psychologists tend to see an internal–external distinction, using locus of causality as a classificatory criterion. Internal attributions explain behaviors as caused by phenomena located within an individual, whereas external attributions point to the environment as causing behavior (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Heider, 1958; Mirels, 1970; Rotter, 1966). On the other hand, sociologists classify causal attributions along the person-based/structure dimension, explaining behavior by character-related factors or by the hierarchical structure that embeds the perceiver and the perceived (Feagin, 1972; Fox & Ferri, 1992; Hollander & Howard, 2000; Howard, 1994; Kluegel & Smith, 1981).[2] We used a sociological lens in studying causal attributions of the Mindanao conflict, because we wanted our conceptual frame to capture the asymmetric power configuration in Mindanao.

We used a structural frame in two ways. First, we examined whether the structural position of the perceiver's group predicted differences in explaining the Mindanao conflict. Second, we looked at whether or not attributions of the perceived conflict developed along a structural theme. Structural position refers to a group's location in an unequal hierarchical arrangement. In an asymmetric conflict, there are at least two group categories, the dominant and non-dominant positions. Bourdieu (1979/1984: 169) connects the social position of the perceiver with subjective interpretations of what is perceived. He claims that 'agents have points of view on this objective space which depend on their position within it'.

Beyond predicting a difference between conflict explanations of dominant and non-dominant group members, we further hypothesize about the nature of these attributional differences. Past studies using a structural conceptual frame have shown that high-power groups tend to perceive person-based causes, while low-power groups are inclined to apply structural explanations to phenomena. Ryan (1971) claims that attributions represent a way of reconciling self-interest or group interests with prevailing social inequality. Groups enjoying the fruits of the dominant structure tend to be oblivious to structural causes of social problems, while marginalized groups remain sensitive to the structural arrangement that gives rise to their misery. For example, to explain success in academe, women emphasize structural factors like university prestige, while men tend to use individualistic explanations like intelligence and ambition (Fox & Ferri, 1992). Explanations of the causes of poverty likewise vary with the perceiver's social position. Higher rates of structural attributions are found among blacks as compared to whites (Gurin, Miller & Gurin, 1980), and among lower as contrasted with higher socio-economic groups (Howard & Pike, 1986). Further, the unemployed more often than the employed attribute joblessness to systemic factors (Gurney, 1981).

We use a power-sensitive attribution frame

[2] Ryan (1971), however, demonstrates that psychologists may occasionally take on a structural view of attributional processes.

to study intergroup differences in attributing causes of the Mindanao war. Mindanao's Muslim–Christian conflict is an asymmetric intergroup conflict with Muslims in the low-power position. We establish objective power positions of the conflicting groups in the Sample Area section below and show data on subjective power positions in the Results section. We predict that Muslim–Christian differences in causal attributions of the Mindanao war would arise along structural interpretations of causation. More specifically, the non-dominant Muslims would attribute the conflict to structural causes and the dominant Christians would see person-based causes of the war.

Method

Respondents

Our survey covered 430 students at Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi City. MSU is the only university in Marawi. Around half of its students are Christians and half are Muslims. A psychology faculty member of MSU collected the survey data. We assumed that survey respondents would perceive her as neutral in the ongoing conflict because she is socially identified with both religions, being a Christian married to a Muslim. Our sampling design balanced both gender and religion. We had roughly half men and half women, half Muslims and half Christians in our sample pool. Respondents' ages ranged from 17 to 34 years, with a median age of 20 years.

Sample Area

Marawi, a Muslim city on the island of Mindanao, was an appropriate sample area for this research because it has been the site of longstanding clashes between Christians and Muslims. This conflict dates back to Philippine colonial days, when Spanish and American colonizers attempted and failed to subjugate the Muslims in Mindanao. Over the years, various solutions to the Mindanao problem have been tried, ranging from political, to economic, to military. None, however, has created lasting peace in the region.[3]

Mindanao has seen armed conflict almost continuously since 1970. In a few years (1978, 1981, 2000), the conflict between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front – later the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, MILF – has claimed more than 1,000 battle-related deaths every year, but in most years it has stayed below this threshold (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Harbom & Wallensteen, 2005). In the past decade, the Philippine government has held on-and-off peace talks with MILF, but the armed conflict continues. MILF is suspected of being behind bombings of a bus in October 2002, an airport in March 2003, a wharf in April 2003, and another bus on Valentine's Day 2005.

Muslims stand as the politically and economically disadvantaged group in relation to Christians. For example, in the first democratic senatorial elections after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, only 2 senators out of 24 were Muslims. Since then, no Muslim has been elected to the Philippine senate. Moreover, only one Muslim has been appointed as head of a government agency/department since 1986. Only 3% of Philippine voters are Muslims, although in Mindanao they make up around 20% of the voting population (National Statistics Office, 2005). Economically, the Muslims experience widespread poverty. Their areas are the most depressed in the entire Philippines, and about 85% of the Muslims live below the poverty line. Five of the 13 poorest provinces in the Philippines are populated mainly by Muslims (Alim, 1995).

[3] For further reading on politico-historical narratives of the Mindanao internal war, readers may want to refer to the following sources: Majul (1999), Gowing (1977), Tan (1977), Muslim (1990), and Vitug & Gloria (2000).

The Instrument

We extracted our list of causal attributions from the discourse of Mindanao's realpolitik. We used as questionnaire items the 11 contentious issues enumerated in the Talking Points agenda of the 1997 peace talks between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (MILF–GRP) (MILF, 1997). The 11 causes included ancestral domain, displaced and landless Bangsa Moro, destruction of properties and war victims, human rights issues, social and cultural discrimination, corruption of the mind and the moral fiber, economic inequities and widespread poverty, exploitation of natural resources, agrarian-related issues, religious differences, and loss of rights to self-determination. From this list, our respondents selected and ranked three causes of the local war that they thought were most important.

To validate whether our respondents subjectively perceived intergroup inequality, we included two five-point Likert-statements about perceived social power of the Muslims. These two items reflect subjective views of power asymmetry between Christians and Muslims in the Philippines: (a) in this country, Muslims are economically better off than Christians are; and (b) the Philippine government has taken away the Muslims' rights to freedom and self-determination. After reversing the score for the first item, we averaged the responses to both statements to create an index of perceived Muslim social power, where 1= low, 3 = average, and 5 = high.

Results

One-Sided Perceptions of Power Inequality in a Conflict

To test whether respondents indeed perceived Muslims as the low-power group, we averaged scores of the Likert-scale index on subjective perceptions of inequality. We expected our respondents' average scores to fall below 3.0 (midpoint), with their perceptions agreeing with objective indices of inequality. We ran a one-sample *t*-test against 3.0 for the entire sample, and then for each subgroup.

Our computations showed that one's group position influenced one's interpretation of a conflict. Although the entire sample averaged 2.66 ($t = -7.96$; $p = 0.00$) and indicated that all respondents perceived Muslims as the disadvantaged group, only Muslims perceived themselves as a significantly disadvantaged group. They scored themselves significantly low, with an average of 2.36 ($t = -10.61$; $p = 0.00$). Christians scored below the average 3.0. However, their responses were not significantly lower than 3.0 and may have occurred by random error (mean = 2.95; $t = -1.04$; $p = 0.30$). While members of a non-dominant group are highly sensitized to their low-power position, high-power individuals stand oblivious to systemic inequality.

Causal Attributions of an Asymmetric Conflict

To test whether causal attribution differed across the two sample groups, we ran a series of regressions, with social power as the predictor variable and scores on each of the 11 causal attributions as dependent variables. We expected that Muslims and Christians would see causes of their conflict from different perspectives. Our results only partially support our predictions. Findings show that both groups agreed on 7 out of 11 causes of the war: ancestral domain, destruction of properties and war victims, human rights issues, economic inequities and widespread poverty, exploitation of natural resources, agrarian-related issues, and religious differences. However, on the four remaining contentious issues, causal attributions of the conflict varied in a predictable way vis-à-vis social positions. Table I shows that the

Table I. Regression Analyses on Four Causes of the Social Conflict with Social Power as Predictor*

	β	t	*Significance*
Social and cultural discrimination	–.14	–2.85	.005
Corruption of the mind and moral fiber	–.16	–3.29	.001
Displaced and landless Bangsa Moro	.23	4.86	.000
Loss of rights to self-determination	.11	2.23	.026

* We used the codes 1 for Christians and 2 for Muslims. Thus, a negative beta weight indicates higher agreement for Christians, and a positive one signifies higher agreement for Muslims.

dominant Christian group tended to see (deficient) person-based causes of war, whereas the non-dominant Muslim group attributed the Mindanao war to unfair structural causes.

The high-power Christians, more than Muslims, attributed the Mindanao war to the following causes: (a) social and cultural discrimination and (b) corruption of the mind and moral fiber. Both these causal attributions fall on the subjective realm and are located in the internal world of the person. For example, discrimination refers to derogatory behavior toward out-group members and is closely linked with subjective prejudices toward members of the target group (Brown & Lepore, 1996). Muslims scored significantly higher than Christians on causes-of-war related to conditions external to the group. Muslims tended to see that the Mindanao war was caused by oppressive political structures. Muslims, more than Christians, attributed the origins of the Mindanao conflict to (a) displaced and landless Bangsa Moro and (b) loss of rights to self-determination.[4] These results confirm that causal attributions of the Mindanao war are influenced by one's group position. Further, war-related societal attributions between two unequal groups differ in the degree to which the conflict is perceived to have structural causes. The non-dominant Muslims attribute the war to structural causes, whereas the dominant Christians see person-based causes of the same war.

Discussion

We investigated whether unequal groups view their asymmetric conflict in different ways. We predicted that a high-power group would see more character-embedded causes of war, while a low-power group would tend to blame the conflict on oppressive political structures. To test our hypothesis, we ran a study among Christians and Muslims in Mindanao and asked them what they saw as the causes of the Mindanao war. Our findings only partly confirmed our prediction. Both Christians and Muslims agreed on a majority of the social issues underlying the Mindanao war. However, in 4 of 11 issues where there was disagreement between the two groups, the discordance was structural in nature. The dominant Christians tended to see person-related causes of war, while the non-dominant Muslims prioritized structural causes of the conflict.

In the course of our research, we serendipitously discovered that a group's social position in an asymmetric conflict may

[4] In a study of the media's explanation of the 1987 US riots, Schmidt (1972) categorized causal attributions of civil disturbance. Racism, a phenomenon that overlaps with social and cultural discrimination, was likewise viewed as internally caused. On the other hand, the need for a civil rights bill and change in the oppressive system, a construct similar to Muslim's rights to self-determination, fell on the externally caused segment of the spectrum, attributing the problematic situation to societal conditions.

likewise affect sensitivities to the existence of intergroup power asymmetry. When we measured subjective views of inequalities, only the marginalized Muslims reported themselves in a significantly low-power position. Christians did not see the social inequality. Our results suggest that dominant groups stand oblivious to inequalities in social structures, because of the advantageous positions they occupy.

Practical Contributions

Our findings can be used to enlighten interventions in asymmetric conflicts. First, one needs to be aware that dominant groups tend to be unaware of social inequalities, while non-dominant groups remain highly sensitized to oppressive conditions. In order to win over allies from dominant groups, interventions may be crafted along the lines of increasing the dominant group's awareness of, and transformative engagements with, power inequalities.

Second, our research findings caution that prescriptions for resolving an asymmetric war may be influenced by the power position of the prescriber. For example, strategies for resolving the Mindanao war may depend not only on what or how peacemaking projects are implemented, but also on who initiates the peacemaking endeavor. Does this or that proposal come from individuals and organizations representing views of the Christians or the Muslims? They may be understanding the root causes of the conflict in chasmically different ways. Christians, top dogs in the conflict, claim that the war stems from internal, subjective orientations of the conflicting groups. Hence, if they are to think of peacemaking and peacebuilding, they may propose value changes and education interventions, to transform the subjective orientations of the local population. Muslims, perceiving themselves at the bottom of the inequitable system, trace the causes of the local war to unjust political structures. If they address conflict resolution issues, their peace dividends may be in terms of political restructuring like the establishment of a Bangsa Moro land and political independence.

Theoretical Contribution

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in its demonstration of how the power position of a group influences subjective understandings and causal attributions of an asymmetric conflict. This research confirms Bourdieu's (1979/1984) contention that social position influences subjectivities of persons who occupy such positions. In an asymmetric war, there are at least two social constructions or interpretations of what is causing the conflict – the character-based narrative from above and the structural story from below. Further, peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts may implement 'correct' interventions, based on subtle but powerful theoretical assumptions borrowed from a single viewpoint. The theoretical challenge that lies ahead may require seeing with multiple lenses.

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