The social psychology of the ethnic group: the case of the bosnian serbs

Sociology, Identity

Abstract: This is a qualitative study, which will focus on thepsychologybehind the formation of ethnic identities in former Yugoslavia. It will explore the identity of the Serbs in Bosnia and will look at their behaviour throughout the war in Bosnia through the prism of crowd behaviour. The essay will examine the internal, as well as external characteristics of the Serbs as an ethnic and social group, and will reveal how their collective identity has been created through the manipulation of certain historical and political factors. The study will aim to propose an innovative approach to understanding crowd behaviour. It will consider the dynamics of external events and their recreation in the political discourse at the time from a constructivist point of view.

1. Introduction and overview

Understanding the psychology of the crowd in a particular historical and political context may lead to a variety of questions. They are mostly related to the creation of collective identities and the manipulation of these identities to fit certain political realities. A complex and fluid matter, social and crowd identity are often wrongly perceived as static and exceedingly given or attributed to a certain group of people. In the study of modern conflicts, group behaviour is a milestone for the proper assessment of the factors, which might lead to a social or political clash.

1. 1 Background and Rationale

In the early 1990s, the world witnessed the demise of the Yugoslav federation, which was accompanied with bloodshed and ethnic clashes between different communities residing in the former Yugoslavia. Under

theleadershipof Slobodan Milosevic, certain ethnic groups were opposed to others, as a result of political manipulation of historical and social factors (Crampton, 2002; Perry, 1998). This dissertation will attempt to address the issues behind the violent clashes in Yugoslavia, which took place between 1992 and 1995 through the prism of group behaviour and the formation of identities. It will assess the importance of historical conditions and events in the context of a wider socio-historical group dynamics, based on collective perceptions, created by political elites.

1. 2 Proposed structure of the dissertation

The dissertation will be divided in the following chapters: introduction; chapter for the research aims and objectives, pursued by this study and the specific research questions, it is looking to explore; literature review section, which will highlight critically main works in the field of social psychology, as well as ethnicity andcultureconflict. The literature review will be followed by a methodology and research design section, focusing on the methods chosen for this research projects and their reliability. A separate section on ethics and ethical consideration will be included, followed by data presentation chapter, which will summarize the results of the research. The discussion chapter will focus on the consistency of the results and their relevance to the findings from the literature review. The last chapter will provide conclusions and recommendations, and will give a brief summary of the findings. Additionally, it will make recommendations based on these findings.

2. Research Aims/ Objectives

2. 1 General research aims

This paper has the following research aims:

To propose an explanation of the Bosnian Serb conflict through Reicher's theoretical framework for the flexibility of the crowd

To identify the specifics of the processes, which have led to the creation of ethnic identity and the existence of this identity as a constructive, or destructive one

2. 2 Research questions/hypothesis

This dissertation will focus on the formation of ethnic identities in the context of the Bosnian war. It will examine the psychology behind the creation of the Bosnian Serb identity as necessarily oppositional to the Muslim one, and will seek to explain the perceptions, which have led to the creation of this dominant identity.

The study will attempt to show that ethnic identities are not fixed and they operate in a particular context, which is part of a wider process of individual self-identification. It will also explain how norms for ethnic behaviour are created by policy-makers in order to justify political agendas.

3. Novelty and importance of the proposed work

3. 1 Significance of the topic

The war in Bosnia, which led to the demise of former Yugoslavia, is perhaps one of the most poignant episodes in Eastern European history in the postCold warera. The understanding of its causes and the events that took

place remains one of the most challenging subjects for historians, and experts in conflict resolution and social psychology. The importance of the project is revealed through its implication of the group dynamics of ethnicities and ethnic identities in former Yugoslavia and Bosnia in particular, which might be crucial for understanding current ethnic conflicts; also, it focuses on an antagonistic relation between minority and majority groups – a strong and perpetuating opposition, which is even more discernible with the advent ofglobalization. Last but not least, this research project is significant because it explores a debatable and controversial question: are ethnicities fixed, or are they created in a certain historical and political settingThe study also reveals the parallel between ethnic and social behavior and the psychological mechanisms, which operate in the context of its creation.

3. 2 Originality of study

The study will attempt to provide an innovative framework of analysis, using a specific theory as a reference and a particular ethnic group as an example. The originality of this study lies in the application of a psychological model of group behaviour in the boundaries of a historically and culturally bound community. In the course of the project it will be revealed that mechanisms, which apply to the behaviour of the crowds, can also be applied in the context of ethnic groups.

4. Literature Review

To summarize the literature in this field is a formidable task, because of the complexity of the issue, and therefore only key works will be considered. For

clarity, the literature review needs to be divided in two sections. One section will critically approach works, related to crowd behaviour. A separate section will explain leading theories, related to ethnicity and ethnic conflict. Finally, gaps of research will be identified, and a theoretical framework proposed.

4. 1 Crowd behaviour and identity

In order to understand the complexity of the matter discussed in this paper, a close review of the literature related to crowd behaviour is necessary. Since the 1960s and 1970s, there is a general tendency towards understanding social identity not as necessarily historic and fixed. Authors such as King (1963) and Moore (1978) have reflected upon social behaviour as a result of external provocation. Additionally, authors such as Stephenson (1979), Graumann and Moscovici (1986) and Berkovitz (1968) have focused on the empirical dimensions of the crowd, but also on the internal factors behind collective behaviour. In their works the tendency towards the explaining the crowd in the process of its making becomes even more recognizable.

In this study it is particularly important to mention the work of Lorenz (1966), who focuses on inborn, rather than acquired behavioural characteristics as determinants for aggression. These characteristics can be triggered in a particular social or cultural context. Despite the criticisms, that this study has raised, and despite the deceivingly primordial stance that it takes, it actually proposes a middle ground for understanding social identity and crowd behaviour, because it captures the fixed, as well as the instrumentalist side of social identity as a form of self-identification.

It is interesting to note that while many scholars propose visions of how social identity came to exist in the format of the crowd, only few attempt to explain whether crowds are violent and destructive, or peaceful and constructive. In a more recent study Rheingold (2003) looks at the crowd as a potential social reformer and carrier of state transformation. Similarly, Surowiecki (2004) sees crowds as the expression of the customary belief, which can become the shaper of social norms. A vision of the constructive forces of the crowd shows the rationality behind crowd behaviour. Both Rheingold and Surowiecki emphasize that crowd behaviour can be shaped according to social norms and signals, in order to follow organized pattern. In this sense they also imply the notion of a modelled behaviour of the crowds. This idea is taken further by Reicher in his study of the crowds as respondents to particular events. Reicher (1996) makes a contribution by mentioning the importance of perceptions in crowd behaviour. The mere existence of the events as such is not important, until they are individually projected, experienced and absorbed. Their internalization by the each one of the individuals in the crowd is what triggers their sense of belonging to a certain crowd or group.

The researcher has decided to use Reicher's framework in this cross disciplinary study of ethnic identity and the behaviour of the crowd.

4. 2 Ethnicity and identity

The literature on the subject of ethnicity is complex and therefore the researcher has decided to separate the works in this field in several categories. Authors such as Crampton (2002) and Perry (1998) explain the

formation of ethnic identities through the prism of history. On the other hand Denich (1994), Fowkes (2002) and Gordy (1999) focus on the materialistic, so to say aspects of ethnic identity and define the psychology behind it as a product of earlier conceptions of the Serbian states. A third group of scholars explain the formation of ethnicity as a construction, and the formation of ethnicity as an instrument for political or economic power. Authors like Oberschall (2000) and Shigeno (2004) focus on ethnic identity as a product, and not necessarily as a primordial characteristic.

One of the challenges in this literature review was to find literature, which is related to both ethnicity and crowd behaviour. Perhaps one of the reasons is that very few, if any, scholars are willing to accept that certain ethnicities can be attributed the behavioural characteristics of the crowd. This paper will argue the opposite and the findings will attempt to fill the gaps in research.

6. Methodology and research design

In order to meet the research aims of this paper, the author has decided to collect primary, as well as secondary data.

Secondary data will come from the analysis of relevant literature such as journal articles and books.

As a research method the author has decided to conduct ten interviews with Bosnian Serbs who fled after the war and have settled in London. The author has chosen interviews as a research method, because they provide the opportunity to explore abstract factors such as the people's perceptions and

visions throughout the wars. Theinterviewalso allows the participants to give a more detailed account of their experience throughout the war and the way the concept of their ethnicity has been represented by the Milosevic circle. One disadvantage of the interview as a research method however is that the data is often difficult to process, because of the unstructured answers of the participants. Its potential weaknesses as a method are also related to issues of subjectivity, because of its format (Bryman, 2008; Sarantakos, 2005).

The interviews will be divided in two parts – part I will have demographic questions and part II will contain eight open-ended questions, which the participants will have to answer. The text of the interviews will be attached in appendix A.

Possible limitations of this study might be related to time constraints, and finding and contacting participants.

7. Ethical considerations

The researcher is aware of issues of confidentiality and privacy related to this study. The names of the participants in the project will be kept in anonymity and the interviews will be used for the purposes of this research only with their own consent. The participants were provided with all information about the purposes of the questionnaire. All research will be conducted in correspondence with ethical standards. Confidentiality and data protection standards will be met.

The data collected throughout the survey will be used only for research purposes, and after a set period it will be destroyed.

Also, the researcher is aware that the subject, on which the participants will be interviewed is sensitive one and requires considerate way of asking the questions.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter needs to summarize the findings of the paper, and to make recommendations based on these findings. In this case, the recommendations will be related to the future study of ethnic conflicts and thesociologyof civil clashes for example, such as riots and protests. Also, fields of further research need to be identified. The researcher might also share what improvements she has made as far as her research skills/methods are concerned.

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