

# Does primordialism best explain the formation of identity groups essay



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The theory of primordialism best explains the formation of all identity groups (based on nation, race, ethnicity, or religion) or identity politics (groups tied to a nation, race, ethnicity, or religion and who get involved in politics in order to achieve certain goals for one's identity group) within countries. Furthermore, identity groups within a country always engage in violence with each other on a grand scale and demand the partitioning of a country (a new country forming out of a larger country in order to satisfy the demands of a group).

Identities and identity groups have been around since the beginning of time and there has been constant debate as to how and why these groups are formed. Although we know that humans are social beings who tend to create relationships, we struggle to determine how and why these relationships are formed. More importantly, we are going to focus on how do we decide who should be in our identity group or to which group we wish to belong to? Do we decide based on our culture, as primordialism would say? Do we join groups simply because it makes sense when it comes to getting the work done as described in the rational-theory?

Or is it that we favor some and create a group to receive that reciprocal feeling back? In the statement above the author assumes that primordialism is the best theory in explaining the formation of identity groups and therefore violence and partitioning a country is the only way to solve conflicts between any two identity groups. As we compare opinions we will see that not only is primordialism not the best theory in explaining the formation of identity groups but also violence and partitioning enemy lines is not the only solution for conflicting groups.

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Primordialism refers to the belief that “ identity groups are in some sense ‘ natural’ or God given, that they have existed since ‘ time immemorial’ and that they can be defined unambiguously by such clear criteria such as kinship, language, culture, or phenotype” (DO, 147). Therefore primordialism believes that identity groups are created through cultural identities, most of which are unchangeable. Although this theory is the oldest approach to explaining identity groups, it is still very relevant today.

Samuel Huntington explains how primordialism is the best explanation for identity groups in “ The Clash of Civilizations”. Although he looks at identity groups as groups of people who will inevitably conflict with groups unlike themselves, he attributes these differences to be purely cultural. Huntington lists six reasons as to why these groups are formed and why they will clash with different identity groups around the world. Some of these reasons include economic identities, cultural characteristics being immutable, and the world becoming a smaller place.

All of these factors coincide with Huntington’s belief that religion is a cultural characteristic that is of the utmost importance to people all around the world. The 2009 Gallup pole supports this: “ religion continues to play an important role in many people’s lives worldwide” (Gallup, 1). Although Huntington provides a valid argument that is quite compelling, Habyarimana provides a more realistic approach to the formation of identity groups in “ Is Ethnic Conflict Inevitable? ”

Habyarimana argues against Jerry Muller in his article “ Is Ethnic Conflict Inevitable? by explaining how ethnic conflicts and identity groups are not as

pervasive as he has previously stated. Habyarimana believes that people from different cultures can not only live together without killing one another, but they can form their own identity groups. Habyarimana gives credit to primordialism but points to studies that have proven that although people from the same cultural usually work with one another, it is not their cultural aspects that always formulate their identity groups.

He goes on to explain that there are two alternative theories that might better explain identity groups: efficiency model and reciprocal theory. Most importantly Habyarimana points out the flaws in all three of these theories through a practical study thus leading us to the understanding that the formulation of identity groups may not always follow one theory or the other. Cultural differences play a role in formulating identities and identity groups but so do the other theories listed. The reasons why identity groups are formed needs to be identified on a more specific basis.

This concept may not be applicable across countries and therefore may pose problems when trying to be internationally compared. Habyarimana illustrates this through his example regarding Uganda. "Of course, ethnicity may not work in Uganda today the same way that it does in other parts of the world or that it did at other points in history" (Habyarimana, 63). Habyarimana believes that primordialism is an incomplete model and therefore there are others that are more effective. In the textbook we can also look at the example of Rwanda.

Rwanda proves that primordialism doesn't hold true for every country because although there were virtually no cultural differences within the

borders, conflict arose anyway. Conflict spread to genocide in Rwanda due to the battle for resources (DO, 169). Although primordialism is an acceptable theory in explaining identity group formation, it is an incomplete model that cannot be enforced across many countries. As we look at the second part of the statement above we note the author pushing the notion that violence and partitioning borders is the only resolve for conflicting identity groups within one border.

We are going to consider Huntington and Habyarimana again in terms of this statement as well. Huntington considers primordialism to be the only approach in describing conflict among groups and therefore believes that at the macro level, different groups will compete for military powers and at the micro level violence and partitioning is the only real resolve. Huntington adversely dedicates two pages to describing the kin-country syndrome, which points out the importance of gaining allies within your culture.

Although this may seem as though he is being contradictory, he is furthering his idea of primordialism and that if there is a cultural difference, it cannot cohabitate within any borders. Huntington concludes his article by explaining “ the next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations”(Huntington, 404). In essence Huntington pushes forward the idea that although people will coordinate to work together within countries, if there are any cultural differences, internal conflict will turn violent.

Huntington believes that violence and partitioning is the only resolution for internal cultural conflict. In conjunction with Huntington, the textbook gives case studies of genocide in Rwanda, and internal turmoil in Nigeria. In both

of these cases we see conflict within a single country due to different identity groups, formed for different reasons. Before we consider the other side of this argument Habyarimana interestingly posits an agreement with Huntington in his article. "Of course, ethnic divisions do lead to violent conflict in some instances.

Violence may be so severe that partition is the only workable solution" (Habyarimana, 61). However, although violence is inevitable in certain circumstances, it is not always the way in which conflicting groups engage in close surroundings. Partitioning and violence is not an inevitability in every situation, it is an unfortunate alternative to severe conflict. Finally if we consider all of Habyarimana's article we can see that although he finds some truths in Muller's point of view of primordialism and violence, he does not agree that there is no other resolve for identity group conflicts.

I stated a quote above that shows Habyarimana advocating for violence in certain situations. He follows those two sentences with: "Yes this extreme response has not been require in most cases in which ethnic divisions have existed" (Habyarimana, 61) He is explaining that although Huntington, Muller, and other political scientists do have a basis and historical facts that back up their theories of primordialism and inevitable violence, they are inflated events that do not accurately portray all the many years of history.

He draws the reader back to idea of how long we have been without violence in the history of group conflict. "Strikingly for every one thousand such pairs of ethnic groups, they found fewer than three incidents of communal violence, although horrifying, is extremely rare" (Habyarimana, 60). These

groups he speaks of are simply ethnic groups that are found to be in conflict with one another. Interestingly Habyarimana discredits the idea of violence but points out other alternatives to violent partitioning.

The creation of institutions is one of his alternatives that he discusses in terms of diffusing conflicting situations. Habyarimana poses a better argument, describing why violence is not always the result of internal identity group conflict and that those said groups do not always form based on cultural aspects. When we consider the statement above I have a hard time agreeing with either part of it. I do not believe that primordialism is a proper theory in explaining the creation of identity groups and I do not believe that those groups result to violence and partitioning borders when conflict is geographically close.

Based on Huntington, Habyarimana, and the textbook I believe there are enough examples to prove that there is no one theory that explains the creation of identity groups and primordialism is a rather incomplete model. Further they disprove the notion that violence is always the solution to conflict, although they acknowledge it is an option when hatred is too intense. Culture is not the only reason why identity groups form and conflicts arise. Culture is a factor that contributes but “ God-given” characteristics are not the only differences that cause conflict.