Bringing perceptions and experiences in:
A novel approach to measuring changes in violent conflict.

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26 June 2017

Abstract: This paper argues that quantitative conflict research benefits from accounting for individuals' perceptions and experiences of violent conflict. Recently, conflict researchers move away from the country (or country-year) as 'natural' unit of analysis and start disaggregating conflicts into events, by actors or spatially. Yet, perceptions and experiences have largely been overlooked for understanding on-the-ground realities of changes in conflict. We contend that accounting for perceptions and experiences by integrating oral evidence, such as testimonies, and local nonverbal forms of expression, such as visual artwork, helps us to grasp changes in conflict in a more nuanced way. It is important to more directly account for individuals' perceptions and experiences, because they are a constituent elements of conflict incidents and the basis for our causal claims regarding individuals' behaviours in conflict (for example, low economic opportunity costs motivate people to fight). We propose a novel methodological framework for how empirical material on experiences and perceptions can be systematically integrated into conflict research. This framework constructively critiques the wide-spread use of "labels" of conflict forms (e.g. civil war vs. drug war), spatial units of analysis (e.g. countries vs. perceived conflict-affected areas) and time (e.g. memories of the past vs. current events). Our novel perception- and experience-based approach leads to a more holistic understanding of the various meanings of violent conflict with important implications for policy-making.

1. Introduction

"The protesters put up the barriers ... in front of the police, under the eyes of the police! [...] That's why I am saying that there are people [in the police] who do not do their job. [...] There is enormous complicity between some policemen and the protesters" (Interview with local resident in Gagnoa, Cote d'Ivoire, September 2015).

"Protesters from Gbagbo's ethnic group erected barricades, torched vehicles and clashed with police in the lead up to the presidential elections" (Event description of the protest on 10 September 2015 in the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset, Raleigh et al. 2010).

Conclusions of outside observers often differ from local perceptions and experiences. Based on reports by French news agencies, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset reports that demonstrators violently clashed with policemen in Gagnoa on 10 September 2015 and records "police forces" as an actor in the conflict event (Raleigh et al. 2010). However, the local observer from Gagnoa reports that protest escalated because police refrained from responding by force and "enormous complicity between some policemen and the protesters". This information adds important nuance to the quantitative data event description: Police forces may not be the target but rather the accomplice of protesters. Listening to the voices of the protesters and the police forces themselves may shed light on these ambiguities.

The main argument in this paper is that perceptions and experiences are not separable from observable events. They may not always be sufficient to understanding these events, but help question what is often an overly simplistic, if not outright wrong, interpretation through mere external observation. When we speak of perceptions and experiences we primarily refer to the meaning that violent conflict and changes within it have to the lives of individuals and communities embedded in it (and to some extent, to the perceptions of outsiders). We do not claim to be able to fully comprehend or represent local people's lived experiences and perceptions, but to *approximate* them. Following critical scholars, we do so by giving due weight to their voices, emotions and other forms of nonverbal expressions (see e.g. Bilgin 2013). Perceptions and experiences thus can be integrated into quantitative work by drawing on data collected through ethnographic research methods, such as testimonies gathered via unstructured or semi-structured interviews, everyday life activities, rituals or customs recorded via participant observation, and information conveyed in art work including photography, theatre, dance, music, film or paintings, for example, from the place where the conflict event takes place.

We propose a systematic way of combining such information on perceptions and experiences on the one hand and quantitative data on conflict events on the other hand. Our methodological approach aims at collecting sets of interpretations or meanings of violent conflict incidences, e.g. violent protest. First, we interpret a conflict event as recorded in the quantitative dataset. Returning to the example from the ACLED database

above, we may conclude that protesters target police as agent of the state government. Second, we gauge the meaning of the recorded perceptions and experiences of the conflict event. For example, building on the interview with a local resident, we conclude that protesters aided by police personnel engaged in dissent against the state government. Third, we reiterate steps one and two for similar events of interest, e.g. events of anti-government protest, until we arrive at a final set of (possibly divergent) interpretations. That is, we stop triangulating interpretations or meanings if we can reasonably conclude that reviewing recorded individuals' perceptions and experiences do not add a new interpretation or meaning. Fourth and finally, we evaluate the implications of these (divergent) interpretations in the light of specific research questions of interest. For example, the experience and perception-based interpretation from above may lead us to conclude that protest turned violent because of police inactivity or police over-reaction. It is important to note that we do not prioritise one interpretation over the other but record both as equally valid and systematically evaluate the consequence of each interpretation for answers to our research question. While cumulative quantitative research acknowledges divergent findings across studies due to differences in measures and data (e.g. Sambanis 2004, Hegre and Sambanis 2006), we make these discrepancies explicitly and trace their origins.

Our perceptions- and experiences-based approach fits well with the current trend towards disaggregating conflict to gain a better understanding of what happens on the ground. Early quantitative research employed crude proxies, such as binary indicators of the onset of internal conflict, and explored the causes and consequences of violent conflict across countries and years. However, the publication of several new (event) datasets on violent conflict has replaced the habitual unit of analysis – the country – with grid cells (e.g. Buhaug and Rød, 2006; Raleigh and Urdal, 2007), geographically distinct ethnic groups (e.g. Wucherpfennig et al., 2016; Cederman et al., 2015), subnational administrative entities (e.g. Murshed and Gates, 2005) or individuals (Hirose et al., 2017) to better capture local variation. With the same goal in mind, our paper takes a step further and disaggregates violent conflict by perceptions and experiences. By doing so, we can develop a holistic understanding of conflict along its various dimensions. This understanding has implications for how we understand changes in the character of conflict, that is how conflict actors, methods, resources, environments and impacts on civilians change over time, space and cultures (see Idler 2017).

We argue that the recent trend in quantitative conflict research to focus solely on the micro-level has benefits for identifying causal effects but is ill-suited to provide a holistic understanding of changes in conflict. Though our perceptions- and experiences-based approach can be used to explain a specific conflict event in specific place and time, incorporating perceptions and experiences, reveals generalizable insights about change in conflict in three areas that have not been studied comprehensively in an interconnected way: change in conflict over time, across space and across cultures (Idler 2017). Regarding changes over time, experiences and perceptions challenge the chronologically linear way of thinking about a history of events. For example, an individual's experience includes collective or individual memories of events which shape this individual's experience and perception of current events. Endured exposure to violent conflict can lead individuals to normalize violence,

making it invisible to both the affected community and the outside (Bourgois 2010). In such cases, sustained exposure to violence may reduce the perceived severity of a conflict, even if observable conflict events are intensifying.[1] Regarding changes across space, perceptions and experiences challenge pre-fixed geographical units of analysis and let us re-think the definition of space. For example, when individuals experience violence in a border region of a peaceful country which is the neighbour of a conflict-affected country, we may want to include those individuals in our analysis because they are similarly exposed to conflict. Regarding change across cultures, we contend that quantitative conflict research has so far categorized violence into distinct phenomena, such as riots, mass killings, civil wars, violent protest, criminal violence, police violence, and so on, based on culture-specific understandings of conflict. Bringing perceptions and experiences in means hypothesizing that these labels could be misleading. Using perceptions and experiences the way we do allows us to identify commonalities across various forms of insecurity (categorized "conflicts") with different labels and differences across forms of insecurity (categorized "conflicts") with the same label. Drawing on the example of protest in Cote d'Ivoire, this comparison between observed and perceived / experienced violent protest may lead to divergent meanings: Violent clashes of anti-governments protesters with police and an act of violent subversion with the involvement of police. What constitutes violence, subversion or conflict varies across cultures and hence "tagging" such events with the same label without accounting for the local context risks misinterpreting the event. Bringing perceptions and experience in, thus, shows that local and external meanings of changes in violent conflict can differ considerably, challenging universally adopted labels and categories.

This paper proceeds as follows: First, we review the new trends in quantitative research, including the disaggregation of conflicts into events in section 2, spatially disaggregated conflict analysis in section 3, conflict actors in section 4 and the integration of survey-based perceptions of conflict in section 5. In each section, we highlight how our perceptions and experiences-based approach enhances our understanding of changes in violent conflict over time, across geographical units and beyond predefined labels. The paper concludes in section 6 by highlighting the transformative impact that our approach may have for policy decisions on conflict interventions.

2. Disaggregation into events

In recent years, research moved from cross-national studies (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon and Latin 2003) to more disaggregated research using event data. Prominent conflict event datasets include the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme - Georeferenced Event Dataset, UCDP-GED (Croicu and Sundberg, 2016; Sundberg et al., 2010), the Social Conflict in Africa Database, SCAD, which now also includes information for Latin American countries (Salehyan et al., 2012) and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, ACLED (Raleigh et al., 2010). There are also several event datasets for specific countries, such as the SIGACT data

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[1] While we are aware that conflict data analysis could use time-varying covariates to account systematic differences in the effect of violent conflict on individuals (e.g. the decision to migrate) over time, we propose ways to measure and integrate change in experienced or perceived violence directly.

coded by the US military in Afghanistan (e.g. Schutte 2016). Event datasets generally contain information on the date and location as well as characteristics (e.g. actors, magnitude, duration) of conflict events.

Event data analysis provides a more nuanced picture of changes in violent conflict over time, space and cultures compared to cross-national analysis. Regarding changes over time, event data partially challenges the linear nature of conflict escalation over time by showing variation within fixed units of analysis, e.g. conflicts or country-years. For example, Eck and Hultman (2007) were first to gather data on events of violence against civilians. They show that there is variation in one-sided violence within the same conflict. Importantly, the number of civilian deaths is not solely determined by the magnitude of fighting. Civilians are not only killed in the cross-fires (for example, Wood 2010). Thus, event data analysis reveals that the impact of violent conflict on civilians may not necessarily mirror conflict escalation stages over time. Our perception- and experience-based approach can add to this. Oral evidence, such as testimonies, and local nonverbal forms of expression, such as visual artwork, may show that individual or collective memories of violence may amplify or reduce the perceived and experienced impact of civilian. Bringing evidence on perceptions and experience in may help explain, for example, the reason behind Schutte's (2016) finding that sustained campaigns of violence against civilians in Afghanistan (2004-2010) are not successful in coercing civilians into supporting violent perpetrators but instead lead civilians to collaborate among each other and resist violence.

Geolocated event data may also challenge our understanding of spatial units of analysis. For example, mapping conflict events reveals clusters of violence that may expand across administrative (state) boundaries. Yet, because covariates of interest are often only available for geographically pre-defined entities (e.g. states, regions, cities), event data analysis often cannot make use of fine-grained geo-located information. In contrast, our analysis of perceptions and experiences is not circumscribed by spatial units of analysis. Similarly, aggregated event data across temporal and spatial units can only approximate individuals' motivation for engaging in conflict. We need to infer motivations for spatiotemporal variation in conflict and covariates. By incorporating perceptions and experiences from ethnographic observation, local art work and testimonies we can directly explore causal mechanisms of interests, for example, whether people join rebel groups our of greed or to rectify their grievances or both or for different reasons.[2]

Beyond these limitations of understanding conflict space, space may also affect the quality of event data themselves. Thus, we may not fully comprehend conflicts in specific environments and make distorted comparisons across space when relying on quantitative event data only. Comparing ACLED and UCDP-GED, Eck (2012) shows that ACLED records a disproportionately higher number of events in cities where information on conflict is more readily available compared to rural or peripheral environments. Relatedly, event data usually builds on written rather than oral sources and national rather than local newspapers. Thus,

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[2] In doing so, we need to be aware of ex-post justifications of individuals and other human biases, such as (selective) memory loss and blocking out unpleasant memories.

event datasets may reinforce the "urban bias" (Kalyvas 2004), emphasizing the national-level, ideological cleavages rather than local-level cleavages, interpreting rural conflict events in "culturalist" terms rather than recognizing their strategic or instrumental interpretations and identifying conventional conflict actors (e.g. rebel groups) while neglecting new or localized actors. First-hand perceptions and experiences of conflict made available through observations, local art work or oral testimonies may thus help to achieve a more nuanced and accurate collection of meanings of conflict.

Finally, event data starts unpacking certain conflict categories and labels, such as "civil war", by paying attention to the nature, the location and actors of conflict. However, we contend that event data analysis still relies on culture-specific labels and categories which can and should be explored further by drawing on perceptions and experiences of individuals. For example, Eck and Hultman (2007) help understand on-the-ground conflict dynamics by exploring variation and changes in civilian victimization during armed conflict (see also, for example, Hultman 2010; Hultman et al 2013). And yet, event data analysis cannot avoid fixed categories and labels. To classify events as one-sided violence, conflict researchers must draw a line between civilians and combatants. Taking off one's uniform or not being involved in battle does not necessarily make one a civilian, but perhaps a better informant, urban militia or messenger. Our perception and experience-based approach can be used to test the validity of the assumptions underlying categories and labels of conflict. Triangulating quantitative data on events categorized as conflict type X, e.g. one-sided violence against civilians, with information on perceptions and experiences by locals helps us to see the different meanings behind events of violence.

3. Spatial disaggregation

Several recent studies have started to use event data and other types of data to analyse conflict across sub-national units. That is, research increasingly replaces the habitual unit of analysis – the nation-state – with grid cells (e.g. Buhaug and Rød, 2006; Raleigh and Urdal, 2007), geographically distinct ethnic groups (e.g. Wucherpfennig et al., 2016; Cederman et al., 2015), subnational administrative entities (e.g. Murshed and Gates, 2005) or individuals (Hirose et al., 2017) to better capture local variation in changes in conflict.

Yet only few studies challenge conventional spatial units, such as cities, third tier administrative regions, nation-states, and so forth. Wimmer and Min (2006) provide a notable exception. They argue that the decision of using nation-states as units of analysis obscures the fact that violent conflict occurs in the process of state formation. In response, they develop a novel dataset of war onset using geographically fixed instead of politically fixed entities from 1816 to 2001 as their unit of analysis. Their analysis shows that change in the institutional form of the state itself is indeed associated with war onset. Most war occurs during the nineteenth century incorporation of most of Africa and Asia into European empires and mid-twentieth

century formation of nation-states in those regions. This type of analysis can be extended to more disaggregated spatial units of analysis (e.g. Buhaug and Rød, 2006; Raleigh and Urdal, 2007).

Bringing perceptions and experiences in contributes to the above outlined endeavour of challenging the fixed meaning of geographical entities, e.g. nation-states or other politico-administrative units. Information on perceptions and experiences allows us to assess how the perceived and experienced relevance of space evolves over time and across cultures, e.g. region becomes subjectively more important than national level. Moreover, we may find out that borders are more fluent than we think they are. Perhaps it is more accurate to compare border regions rather than countries across the world because border regions are more similar in terms of people's experiences and perceptions of conflict than countries. Border areas, especially in vulnerable regions of the world, tend to manifest intensified security dynamics of more diluted dynamics elsewhere (Idler forthcoming). Hence, comparing change in conflict across similar border areas on different continents through the experiences of transnational communities can yield new insights that remain hidden when focusing on national or subnational units or regional clusters.

4. Disaggregation into actors

Quantitative conflict research theorizes about changes in the behaviour of collective actors (rebel groups, governments, the military, UN peacekeepers) to explain variation in the occurrence of conflict. However, such analysis often falls short of tracing the behaviour of those actors directly. Instead, quantitative conflict researchers tend to infer government or rebel group behaviour from much more aggregated data. For example, observing a correlation between low GDP per capita and the occurrence of violent conflict, researchers conclude that rebel groups' fighting strength increases due to low economic opportunity costs for joining rebel organizations (e.g. Collier & Hoeffler 2004). Group-level and individual-level evidence and recorded perceptions and experiences are needed to explore this and other causal claims in more depth.

Quantitative conflict research has recently made progress towards a better empirically grounded understanding of the nature and behaviour of conflict actors. For example, Cunningham et al. (2009) collect data on rebel group strength and other attributes of non-state actors and then show that strong rebel groups fight on average shorter wars with governments and get more concessions compared to weaker or splintered rebel groups. Gallagher Cunningham (2011) gathers data on internally divided non-state armed actors and finds that while internally divided rebel groups receive more concessions, concessions to unitary rebel groups

are more beneficial for settling a violent conflict. Much research focusses on disaggregating non-state actors (Warren and Troy, 2011; Gallagher Cunningham et al., 2012). Only recently, research started to entangle the attributes of government too. For example, Carey et al. (2013) examine under which conditions governments outsource accountability for violence to pro-government militias (see also Jentzsch et al., 2015).

While quantitative political scientists have become attentive to the characteristics and behaviour of domestic actors, research on characteristics and behaviour of conflict actors at the international level is still at an early stage. Quantitative researchers have started to unpack UN peacekeeping mission (Clayton et al., 2017) but tell us next to nothing about the activities and characteristics of non-UN or non-EU international organizations, such as the African Union, ECOWAS or SADC (Gilligan and Sergenti 2008, for an aggregated analysis of UN vs. non-UN third party intervention). More fine-grained data is available for UN peacekeeping missions, including their military and police personnel numbers (Hultman et al., 2014, 2013, 2016) and linguistic and national composition (Ruggeri & Bove 2016). However, one of the most striking post-Cold War phenomena related to international intervention has not been tackled by researchers (for an exception, see Dorussen and Gizelis 2013). That is, the increasingly intrusive nature of international intervention into realms of state sovereignty, such as election organization, constitution-writing, security sector reform and law-making. New data on UN and other organizations' peacekeeping activities may be a way forward in this direction.

But having more disaggregated measures of the characteristics and behaviour of actors involved in conflict does not suffice to uncover the local meanings of conflict which drive behaviour and shape the nature of conflict in the first place. Western-educated academics may see a clear difference between rebel and government behaviour, considering each actor a different category that requires separate scrutiny. Yet these are culturally shaped assumptions that do not necessarily reflect conflict dynamics on the ground. Regardless of whether they are labelled "rebels", "paramilitaries" or "state forces", locals often perceive these conflict actors to be just another "armed group". This can be observed when people start to whisper and get nervous in the presence of members of any of these groups. They may become more relaxed when one of the groups gains strengths and imposes clear rules that people can follow (Idler 2014). Ethnographic observation thus can shed light on behaviour of conflict actors that sheds light on changes in conflict from a very different way than "conventional" quantitative conflict research does.

Quantitative research disaggregating conflict into actors also fails to account for the influence of actors that operate outside conflict zones. Testimonies from the Venezuelan border zone next to Colombia for example

demonstrate how Colombian conflict actors have shaped everyday dynamics in Venezuela and how changes in the behaviour of Colombian rebels have influenced forms of violence in the neighbouring country (Idler and Forest 2015). Another case in point is the influence of Mexican drug cartels in Colombian towns at the Pacific coast. Rap music glorifying Mexican drug kingpin "El Chapo" was highly popular among Colombian youth in one of the country's most war-torn towns. As some of these young people are likely to be among tomorrow's rebel recruits, exploring local artforms such as rap music, can give insights into how and why rebel behaviour changes from a very different perspective.

Finally, quantitative works in conflict may fail to adapt to changes in the nature of actors in a timely manner. While quantitative studies shed light oo new actors, such as peacekeeping missions or NGOs as relevant actors, there is a time lag between the appearance of these actors and the beginning of serious study of them, normally once their relevance has reached (externally defined) threshold of significance. Listening to voices that refer to new actors on the local level before their activities have had wider repercussions may be a way out of this dilemma.

5. Perception of individuals in conflict: Surveys vs. experiences and perceptions

Since Blattman and Miguel (2010) called for greater attention to individuals in conflict, much has been done to better integrate the perceptions of individuals into the quantitative study of conflict. Research using quantitative data mostly rely on surveys and survey experiments. Novel perception-based measures of conflict are also derived from social media data, e.g. terrorist attacks as reported on Twitter (Zeitzoff 2011). While a step in the right direction, we argue that these structured data cannot pick up on yet unknown dimensions and aspects of conflict as experienced by local actors.

Quantitative measures of perceptions have enriched our understanding of causal mechanisms and made phenomena observable that would have been hidden otherwise. For example, Blattman (2009) uses survey data to analyse how ex-combatants' perceived experience of violence influences their political engagement in Uganda. Survey data on how ordinary citizens in Liberia perceive violence has been used to predict collective events of contention in the future (Blair et al., 2017). Beyond these single-country studies, perceptions have been integrated into cross-national research as explanatory factors. For example, Langer et al. (2017) develop an index of social cohesion and conflict based on Afrobarometer survey data for several African states. Linke et al. (2015) hypothesize and show using Afrobarometer data that the observed rate of

conflict in a given area is linked to past levels of support for the use of violence in that same area. Using more disaggregated data, Hirose et al. (2017) contend that the location, type, and lethality of insurgent violence are all shaped by the underlying spatial distribution of civilians' relative support for combatants. Other researchers do not use perceptions as explanatory variable but seek to explain individuals' perceptions of violence. For example, Collier and Vicente (2014) explore how ordinary citizens react to large-scale violence related to elections in Nigeria and whether they resist politicians using violence.

While there is an increasingly sophisticated literature incorporating quantified perceptions of individual, the "perceptions and experiences" lens can add more nuance to our understanding of conflict. We contend that carrying out surveys or asking structured interview questions on rebel behaviour, for example, is not the same as understanding how people experience life in a territory where not only rebels, but also other violent non-state groups, in addition to state forces, operate. Open-ended questions in unstructured or semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations and analysis of local artwork allows for greater room to uncover more nuances in how conflict evolves over time, space and cultures.

Our approach explicitly allows for the possibility that perceptions systematically differ from manifest incidents of conflict and we want to analyse how, when and why these differences occur. For example, evidence from Samaniego and other locations in Colombia shows that citizens do not feel secure despite an ongoing national and local level peace process (Mouly et al., 2016). A fruitful area for more research is whether and why declines in physical violence may not be accompanied with similar declines in perceived insecurity among civilians. Sociological and criminological work on criminal violence explores perceptions of insecurity for several decades. Studies of objective versus subjective security for example, have shown the diverging levels of perceived and observed insecurity in Latin America, the continent with the world's highest murder rates and yet relatively little attention from conflict researchers (Idler 2014). Yet notions of "societies of fear" (Koonings and Krujit 1999) as used in the Latin American context are equally valid in other countries and could indeed be used to cross-fertilize quantitative conflict research.

Policy institutions have also worked towards bringing perceptions in. UNDP made "citizen security" that focuses on people's perceptions the theme of its Human Development Report 2013, emphasizing its "human face", and already the Inter-American Development Bank (2011) developed indicators to measure perceived insecurity, risk and fear. Comparing and contrasting such data with data from other sources, including artwork and testimonies can enrich the rather unidimensional understanding of perceptions via surveys that

quantitative conflict research manifests currently.

6. Conclusion: Transformative impact of the novel perceptions- and experiences-based approach

Accounting for perceptions and experiences in a more holistic and systematic way that goes beyond surveys and selective case studies to complement large-N studies enhances our understanding of change in conflict. International organisations and national aid agencies champion concepts such as "local ownership", "do no harm" and "conflict-sensitive programming" and yet, policy prescriptions – and even more donor cheques – are mostly guided by externally produced evidence, such as, the evidence found in most large-n conflict databases. The effect of using scientific but one-sided accounts of conflict is reinforced by the trend of developing indices, such as the "failed states index", "Global Terrorism Index" or "Global Peace Index". Even though subnational data is available, these indices still tend to produce country rankings, not least to accommodate donor requirements and to be of use to state-based institutions such as the UN. Yet this does not only distort conflict dynamics, it also produces rankings that stigmatise countries, which may perpetuate violence rather than reducing it.

Integrating local perceptions and experiences more firmly into such research efforts does not substitute the need for a more equally distributed knowledge base on conflict that draws on data sources and expertise across the globe. Yet it is at least a step forward towards making both researchers and policymakers more sensitive to the potential for discrepancies between externally shaped ideas of conflict and of how to solve them on the one hand, and local experiences thereof on the other. Ultimately, we need to ask whose peace we aim to contribute to. Raising awareness of the gaps, and sometimes contradictions, between quantitative research on changes in conflict and the variation and nuances in the experiences and perceptions of such change in conflict across time, space and cultures puts this question higher academics' agenda. Hopefully, it can also spark a transformative discussion in the policy arena.

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