ANALYZING COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD

Narratives of recognition and nonrecognition in the pursuit of reconciliation

CAGLA DEMIREL
ANALYZING COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD

Narratives of recognition and nonrecognition in the pursuit of reconciliation

CAGLA DEMIREL

Södertörns högskola
Abstract
This dissertation analyzes the narrative manifestation of competitive victimhood and its variations within reconciliation processes. Competitive victimhood (CV) emerges when opposing groups assert themselves to be the sole or primary victims of conflict or use their historical suffering to rationalize ingroup transgressions. This study explores the notion of CV in four relational settings with various levels of violence, ranging from low-level conflict to civil war and mass atrocities, each having a different temporal proximity to violent incidents: Turkish–Armenian relations, relations between Catholic Republicans and Protestant Unionists in Northern Ireland, and both Bosniak–Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat–Bosniak relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The data analyzed include 60 interviews, public opinion polls, political party manifestos, political statements, NGO reports, documents, and memory sites. The research investigates narratives that convey perceptions of outgroup suffering and the perpetration of harm against outgroups. In so doing, it underscores the challenging relationship between the recognition of outgroup victimhood and acknowledgment of harm the ingroup has perpetrated on others, resulting in five categories that indicate varying levels of competitiveness: revengeful victimhood, strong–CV, mid–CV, weak–CV, and inclusive victimhood. This novel analytical framework facilitates observation of the manifestation of different levels of CV in conflict-to-peace transitions, as well as analysis of empirical examples representing variation from highly competitive to more inclusive victimhood. The weak–CV and inclusive victimhood categories also enable identification of the potential for memory-sharing in ethnonational groups’ conflict- and war-related narratives. A reflexive comparative analysis of case studies highlights the presence of CV across all cases, despite variations in the level of violence and temporal proximity to its occurrence. Findings reveal the importance of considering two factors in analyzing competitive victimhood: the symmetry/asymmetry of exposure to violence and contemporary political power struggles between ethnonational groups.

Keywords: competitive victimhood, post-conflict, reconciliation, ethnonational relations, narratives
Abstract (Summary in Swedish)

Nyckelord: competitive victimhood, postkonflikt, försoning, etnonationella relationer, narrativ
I would like to express my sincere appreciation to all the individuals who have played a part in nurturing my academic development and guiding me through my journey to complete this PhD. First and foremost, this work would not have been possible without voluntary participation of my research interviewees. I am deeply thankful for their insightful perspectives and the time they generously spared to participate.

One of my fortunes has been the opportunity to complete my PhD in Sweden, a country where academic culture is very constructive and collaborative. My initial project idea has blossomed in the encouraging and cooperative working environment of the Political Science Department and the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University, far more than I could have imagined in the beginning. This was especially thanks to invaluable guidance, support, and mentorship of my three supervisors, Simon Birnbaum, Fredrika Björklund, and Johanna Manner gren Selimovic.

Simon, I cannot thank you enough for your consistent dedication to this project. Your expertise, always spot-on remarks, and meticulous attention and care at every stage of the research project have been tremendously helpful in guiding me through this process. Fredrika, I deeply appreciate your invaluable insights and helpful comments, which have significantly enriched my intellectual journey. Johanna, it is hard to describe how thankful I am that you joined us halfway through the PhD process and left an indelible mark on my academic journey. Your constructive and inspiring comments have been pivotal in shaping the outcome of this research. I have also found immense joy and inspiration in collaborating with you on teaching, brainstorming, and writing. Many thanks also to all of you for your endless kindness through the years.

My heartfelt thanks go to Karin Borevi and Linda Ekström for the time you both invested in reviewing my work and for your constructive suggestions during the final stage of the writing process, which enhanced the quality and clarity of the dissertation significantly. I am equally grateful to you both for your consistently warm and welcoming demeanor. I also deeply appreciate Mats Braun, Nina Carlsson, Linda Ekström, Johan Eriksson, Eva Hansson, and Timothy Williams for their engaged reading of my work during my final, half-time and proposal seminars. Their stimulating and helpful comments and perspectives made a substantial contribution to advancing this research.

I extend my special thanks to Johan Eriksson for encouraging me to embark on the path to doctoral studies. Johan, I deeply appreciate the experience of co-authoring the first paper of this compilation dissertation with you, as well as your valuable feedback on other parts of the dissertation and all your support throughout my PhD
process. Many other colleagues also contributed to this journey with insightful discussions and conversations, collaborative works, and shared administrative tasks. My heartfelt appreciation goes to Florence Fröhlig, Ninna Mörner, Yuliya Yurchuk, Martin Englund, Tora Lane, Ramona Rat, Olena Podolian, Joakim Ekman, Roman Privalov, Helen Lindberg, Anastasiia Chupis, Cemre Azizoğlu, Nicholas Aylott, Hugo Faber, Alyona Hurkivska, Jaakko Turunen, Vasileios Kitsos, Xiaoying Li, Hamdija Begovic, Sofia Beskow, Fakhreddin Rad, Ola Luthman, and Nina Carlsson. Nina, how can I thank you enough for stepping in as a peer-mentor right from the start? You helped me in so many ways that nothing I say can fully capture your selfless support and infinite kindness. I cannot imagine what all these years would have looked like without you being there.

I also owe many thanks to the generous funding from the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (Östersjöstiftelsen), which made this work and my involvement with all these amazing scholars possible. Thanks also to the Helge Ax:son Johnson Foundation for providing a grant to finalize this dissertation.

I am also deeply appreciative of all the individuals whose insights and feedback in workshops and at conferences have enriched my understanding of this research topic and its contexts. Thanks, in particular, to Marie Breen-Smyth, Jasna Dragovic-Soso, Pero Finci, David Gaunt, Sergiu Gherghina, Susanne Knittel, Denisa Kostovicova, Andreas Moeller, Valida Repovac Nikšić, Camilla Orjuela, Filipa Raimundo, Maja Savic-Bojanic, and Sanne Weber for their invaluable feedback on various parts of this dissertation. Among others, the family of Peace Research in Sweden (PRIS) has a special place in my academic development. I especially thank Manuela Nilsson, Patrick Johansson, Malin Åkebo, and Juanita Esguerra Rezk with whom I collaborated closely.

I have been very lucky in having the most dedicated Director(s) of Studies throughout my PhD process. I sincerely thank Lisa Kings, Liudmila Voronova, and Eva Karlberg for their invaluable support and assistance in every possible corner of my PhD education. Eva, huge thanks to you for always being there for me, even beyond the borders of academia. I am profoundly grateful to you, Lina Lorentz, for your consistent assistance and support in administrative affairs, for making bureaucracy less complicated throughout the years. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Ulrika Lindbäck and Paul Fuehrer for their efforts in simplifying the complicated processes with the Migration Agency that all international students suffer one way or another. I am also very thankful for all the support from Martina Lindberg and Vit Kysilka and for their excellent administrative skills.

I reserve a special mention for the people who supported and assisted me throughout my fieldwork. My heartfelt gratitude goes out to the entire Co-operation Ireland family for their unwavering warmth and selfless assistance, which played a crucial role in facilitating my research in Northern Ireland. I deeply appreciate Peter Sheridan, Anne Porter, Alan Largey, Barry Fennell, and Evan Short for their efforts to connect me with relevant contacts and for accompanying me to various meetings.
Warm thanks to Liam Kennedy, Stephanie Burns, and Kieran McEvoy for kindly sharing their scholarly insights with me. Deepest thanks belong to Paula Cunningham and Marie Prestgard, who made Belfast home for me during my stay. Paula, without your wit, humor, and extraordinary warmth, I could not have survived the homesickness that often accompanies fieldwork. Marie, without you, I would never dare to sneak into an internal Sinn Fein meeting. Yes, I am officially admitting it now: we did it!

The COVID-19 pandemic and related travel restrictions represented the darkest and most difficult point in this research process. It coincided with the initial phases of my focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina, and not being able to travel and collect material deadlocked the project for a while. I am deeply thankful to all individual scholars and international experts who lighted my way through with their expertise on Bosnia and Herzegovina. I especially thank Sabina Čehajić-Clancy, Nicolas Moll, Tijana Karić, Alma Jeftić, Hikmet Karčić, Jago Salmon, and Ivan Lupis for generously sharing their insights with me. I also appreciate Bruce Berton, Eva Gibson Smedberg, and Elizabeth Tomasniec for generously sharing their time and views with me.

My greatest fortune lies in my cherished family and friends – my parents Neriman Tuna and Coşkun Tuna, and my brother Charlie Tuna. I am endlessly grateful to you for shaping who I am. If not for our endless political discussions as a family, my initial fascination with this research subject might never have developed. I also deeply thank Sema Demirel, Osman Demirel, and Ahmet Faik Doğan for the infinite joy and love you brought into my life. Heartfelt thanks to Çiğdem Derya Emin and Sinem Eyüboğlu for your constant support and our shared laughs, which set my mind at ease during the most overwhelming times. I was also extremely lucky to have Sinem Hayali Emir by my side all these years, who at the same time generously guided me to anticipate potential psychological nuances during the interviews with research participants. My warmest thanks to Sonia Siropian and her family for their inspiring existence in my life. Sonia, your endless support and encouragement made me stick with this project, even when you were not aware of it.

Buğra, words would fail me if I tried to thank you. This journey is as much yours as it is mine, as it changed our joint lives drastically. I cannot describe how grateful I am to you for adamantly believing in me, for enduring all the shadows and isolation this project brought into our lives, for debating with me when I needed it most, for cautiously feeding me when I forgot to eat, and for not letting a single day pass without a brilliant laugh. Huge thanks also for reminding me, as this project turned me into a past-oriented person, that what matters most is not always the past: there is a future, and it is probably bright.

Çağla,
Stockholm, 24 August 2023
## Contents

List of papers ................................................................................................................................................. 15  
List of abbreviations ..................................................................................................................................... 17  

1. Introduction.............................................................................................................................................. 19  
   1.1. Chapter outline ............................................................................................................................... 22  
   1.2. Aim and research questions ........................................................................................................ 22  
   1.3. Criteria for case selection .............................................................................................................. 25  
   1.3. Addressing study constraints ........................................................................................................ 29  

2. Situating the research in light of previous literature ........................................................................... 31  
   2.1. Conceptualizing reconciliation ..................................................................................................... 31  
      2.1.1. Why reconciliation and not transitional justice? .............................................................. 33  
      2.1.2. Political essence of peace and reconciliation ..................................................................... 34  
      2.1.3. The subjects of reconciliation .............................................................................................. 35  
      2.1.4. Approaching reconciliation with an emphasis on recognition ...................................... 36  
   2.2. Narrative identity approach to victimhood and reconciliation ............................................... 39  
      2.2.1. The role of narratives in identity construction and conflict ............................................. 39  
      2.2.2. What should reconciliation consist of, an identity change or narrative transformation? ........................................................................................................ 41  
   2.3. Towards a new theoretical framework: narrative variation from competitive to inclusive victimhood in diverse post-conflict societies ............................................................... 44  
      2.3.1. Defining collective victimhood vs. individual victimization .............................................. 44  
      2.3.2. Understanding ethnonational competitive victimhood .................................................. 45  
      2.3.3. Introducing a novel framework: competitive victimhood typology ........................................ 48  

3. Research design, method, and material ................................................................................................ 51  
   3.1. Interpretive approach, thematic analysis, and analytical tools ................................................ 51  
   3.2. Material and data collection .......................................................................................................... 54  
   3.3. Interviews ......................................................................................................................................... 55  
   3.4. Ethical considerations .................................................................................................................... 57  
   3.5. Identity, positionality, and reflections from field work ............................................................ 58  

4. Summary of the research papers ............................................................................................................ 63  

5. Discussion of findings, contributions, and directions for future studies ........................................ 67  
   5.1. Revisiting research questions considering the theoretical and empirical contributions .... 67  
   5.2. Contributions of the dissertation ................................................................................................. 75  
   5.3. Suggestions for future research .................................................................................................... 77
List of papers

**Paper I**

**Paper II**

**Paper III**

**Paper IV**
Demirel, Cagla “Does power-sharing facilitate memory-sharing? Bosnian Croat narratives in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina”. Currently under review in the journal of *East European Politics*. 
## List of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABiH</td>
<td>Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BiH</td>
<td>Bosnia and Herzegovina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CV</td>
<td>Competitive victimhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUP</td>
<td>The Democratic Unionist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBIH</td>
<td>Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDZBiH</td>
<td>Croatian Democratic Union (Bosnia and Herzegovina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HVO</td>
<td>Croatian Defence Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICTY</td>
<td>The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JNA</td>
<td>The Yugoslav Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RS</td>
<td>Republika Srpska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDA</td>
<td>Party of Democratic Action (Bosnia and Herzegovina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDP</td>
<td>Social Democratic Party (Bosnia and Herzegovina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDLP</td>
<td>The Social Democratic Labour Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UUP</td>
<td>The Ulster Unionist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VRS</td>
<td>The Army of Republika Srpska</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction

Competitive victimhood is a compelling phenomenon that emerges in the aftermath of conflicts within societies that are grappling with ethnonational identity divisions. The most striking reference to competitive victimhood during my research was made by an interviewee from Sarajevo; the interviewee aptly described it as a “victims’ Olympics”. Olympics simply refers to a competition amongst individuals who represent their respective nations. However, the concept of a victims’ Olympics in post-conflict societies indicates competition between groups with the aim of being recognized as the main victim group of the conflict. In order to be “victorious” in a victims’ Olympics, a group must bear a greater burden of suffering, and have endured greater losses in terms of both severity and numerical magnitude. This description encapsulates the complex dynamics of ethnonational relationships in the aftermath of violence, as victimhood becomes a part of ethnicity, and ethnonational groups emphasize ingroup victimhood and underestimate outgroup suffering.

The concept of a victims’ Olympics foreshadows one of the many thought-provoking narrative examples that will be explored further in this dissertation to reveal the intricate layers of competitiveness over who suffers more and who is more to blame in post-conflict reconciliation. Stories about historical suffering are not a recent phenomenon, given that they have always intrinsically helped in the construction of ethnic and national identities. However, the salience of such stories has gained greater attention at the end of the 20th century due to the increasing attention to human rights. In considerable instances, growing interest in victims is manipulated through selective portrayal of certain individuals and groups as “victims to be protected” during times of violence, while others are disregarded. Furthermore, they become commodities of nationalism as “victims to be remembered” once violence has ceased (Nguyen 2013). As a result, increasing political use of moral righteousness in times of violence has altered the central value of nationalism from heroism to victimhood (Wydra 2013), thereby blurring the line between the protection of victims’ dignity to ensure the non-recurrence of violence and the exploitation of victimization experiences for groups’ political gains or justifications of acts.

Critically examining and understanding the nuances and intricacies of competitive victimhood is essential for ultimately paving the way for restoring good relations between ethnonational groups in numerous post-conflict contexts within which competition in how the past is remembered may become a central characteristic of collective relationships (Wang 2018; Koposov 2017). In these contexts, contested narratives about the violent incidents are highly likely to haunt future relationships. Even when peace agreements have been formally signed, promising steps towards
reconciliation can falter despite initial optimism, and the anticipated harmonious societies may not materialize due to continued divisions. When narratives about a violent past are contested, it is very likely that conflicting sides claim greater victim status and deny ingroup harmdoing against others, thus creating intractableness in the realm of collective remembrance.

This dissertation investigates the concept of competitive victimhood and its variations from an ethnonational perspective in different post-conflict reconciliation processes. First and foremost, it seeks to expand the conceptualization of competitive victimhood beyond its current narrow focus on ideas about ingroup and outgroup victimhood by including considerations of ingroup perpetration of harm against others. Building upon this expanded conceptualization, this dissertation explores narrative manifestation(s) and variation(s) of ethnonational competitive victimhood in reconciliation processes. This investigation focuses on narratives as they play a significant role in reinforcing collective identities and shaping subjective group ascriptions of right and wrong after a conflict, namely who suffered more and who is to blame for the harm. The dissertation’s second interest is to examine competitive victimhood in various reconciliation contexts following varying degrees of violence, ranging from mass atrocities to civil war to relatively low-level violence. It moreover considers the diverse temporal proximity to the occurrence of violence, spanning from remote historical events to mid-historical and recent historical occurrences.

Early proponents of the concept of competitive victimhood in the field of social psychology have defined it as a situation where each side in a conflict claims to be the main victim or justifies the harm it has caused to others based on past ingroup victimhood (Noor, Brown, and Prentice 2008a; Shnabel, Halabi, and Nadler 2012). Several scholars have examined how competitive victimhood impedes attempts at reconciliation (Noor et al. 2012) and have investigated ways to overcome it through intergroup interactions, construction of an umbrella group identification, or a common victim and common perpetrator identity (Andrighetto 2012; Noor et al. 2015; Adelman et al. 2015; Shnabel, Halabi, and Noor 2013). Accordingly, they have associated competitive victimhood with conflictual relations, and common victim identity and inclusive victim consciousness with peaceful relations (McNeill, Pehrson and Stevenson 2017; Vollhardt and Bilali 2015). However, competitive victimhood from an ethnonational perspective has remained under-studied, and the focus on the binary competitive and inclusive victimhood categories has failed to account for potential variations within competitive victimhood. Although a narrative transformation in post-conflict societies has been widely debated and suggested by scholars of reconciliation (Schaap 2005; Auerbach 2009; Strupinskiene 2012), the specifics of what a narrative alteration might entail have remained relatively unexplored and under-researched to date, despite their potential empirical observability.

---

1 Competitiveness over victimhood can also occur amongst different groups of victims of the same perpetrators. The present study draws on the concept with reference to intergroup relations. This point is further discussed in the literature review.
Furthermore, scholars have focused on competitive victimhood mostly in intractable conflicts without clearly distinguishing between ongoing violence and post-conflict contexts (Bilali and Vollhardt 2013; SimanTov-Nachlieli et al. 2015; Andриghetto et al. 2012; Noor et al. 2008; Ferguson et al. 2010; Shnabel and Noor 2012; Pilecki and Hammack 2014), or structural inequalities and intra-minority conflicts (Saguy et al. 2013; Phillips and Lowery 2015; Mashuri, Zaduqisti, and Sukmawati 2015; White et al. 2006). Most studies focusing on intractable conflicts have provided only a brief overview of the conflict(s) without carefully considering conflict-related contextual differences (Noor, Brown, and Prentice 2008).

To comprehensively understand competitive victimhood in reconciliation processes and address the gaps in the existing literature, this dissertation investigates the phenomenon in different contexts with various experiences of violent conflict between ethnonational groups. Competitive victimhood is evident in many contexts worldwide, ranging from liberal democracies to autocracies to ongoing conflicts. It can occur among conflicting individuals, groups, or nations in which experiences of suffering are reciprocal or are believed to be so regardless of the righteousness or wickedness of the claims. This study is interested in ethnonational competitive victimhood in post-conflict contexts where violence does not disrupt current intergroup relations any longer and progressive dynamics of reconciliation processes can provide relatively better opportunities to move forward from the burden of the past and potentially entail a narrative variation.

Of the contexts in which competitive victimhood potentially exists, the Turkish-Armenian relations as a post-mass atrocity context, Catholic Republican and Protestant Unionist relations in Northern Ireland as a post-conflict context, and Bosniak-Serbian relations as well as Bosniak-Croatian relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina as post-civil war contexts are suitable cases for exploring and analyzing competitive victimhood. These cases all share a similar pattern of ethnonational rivalry embedded within contested narratives about the violent past despite different scales of communal experiences of violence and changing temporal proximity to violent incidents. In all cases, groups have gone through peace and reconciliation attempts to various extents. Even though the successes they entail are debatable, they are still relatively stable cases. Hence, exploring and providing insights into competitive victimhood in reconciliation processes in respective case studies is a compelling and promising method to thoroughly understand this phenomenon.

This dissertation employs a qualitative research design and combines a theoretical framework with a thematic analysis of primary and secondary material (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006; Ryan and Bernard 2003). The collected data for investigating intergroup victimhood narratives consist of public opinion polls, interviews with local actors, party manifestos, public statements, newspapers and narratives from multiple memory sites. It consists of four individual papers focusing on each case study and this introductory chapter. Finally, the introductory chapter links all the case studies via a “reflexive comparison” in response to the dissertation’s second
research question discussed in the concluding section (Gingrich and Fox 1997; Björkdahl and Kappler 2017).

The discussion in this dissertation deliberates competitive victimhood in light of the previously established intersection of political science, peace and reconciliation and memory studies, which have extensively addressed contested memories in the aftermath of collective violence (Mälksoo 2015; Koposov 2017; Subotic 2009; Mannergren Selimovic 2013; Nguyen 2013). By combining these bodies of literature, it adopts a novel framework of competitive victimhood typology for understanding group relationships in the aftermath of violence. Hence, the theoretical and empirical discussions presented here go beyond previous debates on collective victimhood, which primarily focus on ingroup victimhood or hierarchies of victimhood, bring the question of collective “perpetratorhood” into debate, and explore the notion of victimhood from a relational perspective by considering the question of reciprocity. Furthermore, it examines the features of narrative variation in terms of recognizing outgroup suffering and acknowledging ingroup guilt or responsibility in imposing harm upon others. Finally, this dissertation discusses the manifestation and variation of competitive victimhood within the transformative dynamics of post-conflict reconciliation by considering temporal and conflict-related contextual differences.

1.1. Chapter outline

The remaining sections of the introduction highlight the aim of this dissertation, present the research questions, and elucidate the strategy for selecting the case studies. The subsequent sections present the theoretical foundation in line with the existing literature and clarify the research gap this research aims to fill. Then, the materials and methods section proceed with a focus on the thematic analysis used to analyze the collected data, which consisted of public opinion polls, interviews, party manifestos, NGO reports, policy documents, and memory sites. The following section presents summaries of each research paper and the findings from the case studies, and the introductory chapter concludes by discussing the dissertation’s overall findings, presenting theoretical and empirical contributions, and highlighting directions for future research.

1.2. Aim and research questions

The first aim of this dissertation is to conceptualize competitive victimhood from an ethnonational perspective in reconciliation processes and show how competitive victimhood narratives in post-conflict societies may unfold to varying degrees. The second aim is to explore how competitive victimhood unfolds across diverse socio-political contexts, considering changing levels of violence and temporal distance from the conflict. As a result, this dissertation reflects on the similarities and differences that emerge within different intergroup settings.
Both research objectives aim to fill specific gaps in previous literature. The initial objective addresses two gaps in the existing knowledge. First, the previous research on competitive victimhood largely defines the concept in relation to recognizing or denying outgroup victimhood (Noor 2008), while neglecting that the notion of ingroup perpetratorhood also plays a significant role in the competitive dynamics of intergroup relations. Second, a conceptual binary constructed in the earlier literature shows no variation in the use of competitive victimhood apart from the absence of competitiveness, often referred to as common victimhood or inclusive victim consciousness (Shnabel et al. 2013; McNeill, Pehrson and Stevenson 2017; Vollhardt and Bilali 2015). Therefore, observing this variation can help to understand the complexity of ethnonational relations in reconciliation processes and in the transition from conflict to peace.

The second objective pertains to the previous literature’s shortcomings in taking contextual differences into account in the analysis of competitive victimhood by focusing broadly on intractable conflicts and making no clear distinction between ongoing conflicts and post-violence reconciliation processes. Interestingly, a conflict over different interpretations about the past emerges and continues in post-conflict societies regardless of the level of violence between groups, be it high-scale violence such as a mass atrocity or low-level conflict. However, prior research on competitive victimhood has not considered the scale of violence-related factors. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on diverse reconciliation contexts following varying degrees of violence. Additionally, the temporal dimension is often overlooked in understanding post-conflict competitive victimhood. Given that time is often considered to heal the wounds of violence, remote historical conflicts can be expected to have less influence on current relations. Hence, in the pursuit of these two objectives aligned with the corresponding gaps in the literature, the following two overarching questions guide this study:

Q1: How can varying degrees of ethnonational competitive victimhood be conceptualized in terms of acknowledging outgroup victimhood and ingroup perpetration of harm against others in post-conflict reconciliation processes?

Q2: How does competitive victimhood play out in the socio-political landscape of reconciliation in various contexts with different scales of communal violence and changing temporal proximity to violent incidents?

Each paper presents a reconciliation process, in which competitive victimhood can potentially be observed following a different scale of violence that also considers temporal differences. Paper I presents an empirical analysis of a post-mass atrocity case in which narratives of competitive victimhood can be observable even a century after the Armenian genocide. In comparison, Paper II provides an example of a reconciliation process after the low-level conflict in Northern Ireland in which potentially varying degrees of competitive victimhood can be observed. It goes beyond the binary
construction of competitive and inclusive victimhood (in other words, no competitiveness) and offers a reconceptualization by describing the characteristics of fluctuating degrees of competitiveness in the use of victimhood narratives.

Paper III and Paper IV investigate competitive victimhood in post-civil war Bosnia and Herzegovina. The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a complicated context and makes use of two case studies due to the three-sidedness of the conflict. The violence between Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks, as well as the violence between Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks, are considered separately. Paper III traces the potential narrative variation from competitive to inclusive victimhood in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, investigating how the recognition of outgroup victimhood and the acknowledgement of ingroup responsibility for harming others are manifested between parties after a recent historical war. Paper IV examines competitive victimhood within the same context but between different groups. The war between Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats was locally referred to as “a war within a war,” within which there were fewer casualties compared to the two groups’ joint war against the Bosnian Serbs. Paper IV departs from the analysis of competitive victimhood and examines the potential link between memory-sharing (manifested as inclusive victimhood) and power-sharing (an institutional, political solution suggested for ethnonational reconciliation) in understanding the Bosniak and Bosnian Croat reconciliation in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There are several overlapping theoretical bases and syntheses in these papers. Firstly, all the papers focus on narrative manifestations of competitive victimhood and indicate the similarities and differences between official and alternative narratives in various units (i.e., public, political elites, civil society, memory sites, and commemorative practices). While papers I and III mainly focus on socio-political aspects of competitive victimhood in reconciliation, Paper I shows how competitive victimhood is used by both parties involved in the violent events, even after a mass atrocity. It also displays variation in competitive victimhood when members of competing groups familiarize themselves with one another’s narratives.

Paper II investigates potential narrative variation from revengeful and strong competitive victimhood to more inclusive victimhood in the aftermath of relatively low-level violence in Northern Ireland and explores these variations through official documents and interviews with political elites, whereas Paper III focuses particularly on more inclusive victimhood in the aftermath of a civil war, where one of the sides lost more victims, and maps potential narrative sites where inclusive victimhood emerges. Finally, papers II and IV demonstrate that addressing the past for the sake of reconciliation processes is not independent of official power-seeking, even though peace agreements establish equal political grounds for the respective sides.

In addition to answering the research questions, this dissertation aims to enrich the debate about competitive victimhood in reconciliation processes by treating it as an inherently socio-political topic. Politics extends beyond the traditional political institutions and actors, and manifests itself in people’s daily lives through political
discourses, narratives, rituals, and symbols (Kaufmann 2015). Scholars of political science and international relations have mainly treated research on reconciliation as a form of personal or social relationships (Rothstein 1999; Lederach 1997; Ross 2003). They often focus on conflict prevention through democratization and institutional remedies. Therefore, intergroup competitiveness over victimhood has remained an understudied concept in political science. Although reconciliation processes inherently encompass broad social transformation, social change is not independent of politics, as this project aims to demonstrate the interplay between society and politics in understanding competitive victimhood in the reconciliation processes.

In the next section, I present the logic of empirical case selection for this research and clarify how each case study relates to the broader theoretical and empirical discussion of the dissertation.

1.3. Criteria for case selection

Analyzing competitive victimhood in various reconciliation processes to see how the former may vary across contexts requires careful case selection. Competitive victimhood is more likely observable in the aftermath of intergroup conflicts, where victimhood becomes a part of group identity and legacies of violence leave controversial claims about the past on both sides of the conflict. Mutual conflicts promote a victim-perpetrator paradigm (Jankowitz 2018), that is, a blurriness in the distinction between the victim and the perpetrator as the transgressions are mutual between groups and experiences of being targeted and targeting others can occur at the same time (Shnabel et al. 2020). Accordingly, this case selection was based on four criteria; the first two criteria show the common features of group relations under scrutiny, while the last two criteria inform the contextual differences distinguishing the cases from one another.

The point of departure for the selection of cases for analyzing competitive victimhood first begins by emphasizing ethnonationalist rivalries, as they offer the potential for observing instances of competitive victimhood. Competitive victimhood very likely emerges in post-conflict societies where group relations are overwhelmingly shaped by ethnonational terms in the aftermath of violence. In this sense, even though violence may not be derived from centuries-old ethnic hatred and instead motivated by other reasons, such as material, political, and ideological ambitions (cf. Kaufman 2001), the notion of ethnonationalism may come to shape and tear the socio-political fabric in the aftermath of violence. In such contexts, after the cessation of violence, conflict continues in symbolic and political ways, and ethnic or national affinity outperforms other contextual factors that influence intergroup relations (Dyrstad et al. 2011). More importantly, victimhood potentially develops as a component of group identity, reflecting groups’ contradictory claims and interpretations of past violence. Former adversaries often emphasize their version of history, and the past is
politicized to pursue political justifications, often resulting in a memory war between ethnonational groups and nations (Koposov 2017).

Second, I concentrate on places where there has been no recent violence and ongoing endeavors to achieve reconciliation have brought relative stability. The eruption of violence is likely to create backlashes in potential narrative transformation in ongoing conflicts (see for example, Strömbom 2014), whereas the nature of a reconciliation process in the aftermath of violence anticipates a transition from conflict to peace. In this sense, it is not merely a state of violence or group competition that one can observe in such contexts (Hancock and Mitchell 2007; Björkdahl and Kappler 2017). Rather, progressive dynamics of reconciliation processes consist of attempts at making peace and are expected to enable narrative variation from the ones triggering violence to the ones promoting good relations. This does not necessarily mean that there is linear progress in these contexts, but rather that conflict and peace exist to varying degrees, as do divergence and consonance regarding interpretation of the past. Therefore, I focus on cases where there is ongoing conflict regarding the narrative of what happened in the past. However, violence in such cases is relatively unlikely or only rarely occurs compared to contexts with frozen conflicts or high tensions, where eruption of violence is only one move away. This criterion is especially essential for the first overarching research question scrutinizing variation in degrees of competitive victimhood in intergroup relations.

Third, each context in this dissertation represents post-conflict societies after differing scales of violence. To indicate variation in the levels of violence, I use three categories: mass atrocity, a civil war, and a relatively low-level conflict. In this sense, they all describe the aftermath of intergroup conflict; however, they also denote subjective memories of varying levels of violence in the emergence of collective victimhood of conflicting sides. One can simply presume in a case of mass atrocity that there could be a relative consensus over who the victims and perpetrators are (Aiken 2008; Shnabel et al. 2020; Demirel 2023b), so there is less potential for competitive arguments about victimhood. However, attributions to the group representations are more complex in civil war and relatively low-level mutual conflict cases. In a civil war context, violence likely emerges on each side of the conflict, leading to experiences of victimization and perpetration of harmdoing for members of each group. Similarly, in a relatively low-level mutual conflict, victimization experiences can occur on both sides of the conflict; nevertheless, victimhood claims might not, in such cases, be as strong as those following a mass atrocity or civil war, since fewer people are affected by the violence.

As the fourth criterion, all research contexts refer to a varying time duration after the occurrence of violence. The temporal aspect is not a central aspect in systemically analyzing competitive victimhood in this dissertation. However, it can still inform our understanding of competitive victimhood in various reconciliation processes as it is grounded on the assumption that victimhood is not “a non-historical static category” (Rossland 2009). Instead, people’s and ethnonational groups’ understandings
1. INTRODUCTION

and attributions to victimhood may change over time (Kelman 2004; Volkan 2009). The temporal dimension can provide insights into the use and maintenance and variation of victimhood narratives, given that time is often considered to heal wounds of suffering, help people to move on, and soften bitter memories of the past. Thus, one may assume that the more remote a conflict in history, the lower the group competitiveness over victimhood. As a result, each case study in this dissertation indicates a reconciliation process with changing durations after violent incidents, namely remote historical, intermediate-historical, and recent historical.

Based on these criteria, I have chosen four communal relational contexts consisting of reconciliation endeavors after various levels of violence, where there are also controversial histories between former adversaries despite the different temporal proximity to the emergence of violence: Turkish-Armenian relations, Protestant Unionist and Catholic Republican relations in Northern Ireland, and Bosniak and Bosnian Serbs relations, as well as Bosniak and Bosnian Croat relations, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Drawing on these case studies, this dissertation investigates fluctuating degrees of competitiveness in the use of victimhood narratives and explores how ethnonational competitive victimhood takes place in different post-conflict reconciliation contexts. Furthermore, case selection also meets the specific aims and research questions in individual papers.

The initial case study centers on Turkish-Armenian relations and provides a descriptive exploration of competitive victimhood narratives surrounding the Armenian genocide. The case selection also accommodates an example of reconciliation after a distant historical mass atrocity. The Turkish-Armenian case differs from other contexts with post-mass-atrocity reconciliation, such as Cambodia, where the mass killings were based on ideological reasons (Williams, 2019) and neither the violence nor post-violence can be characterized as ethnically-oriented. In Rwanda, the conflict was ethnically motivated. However, the Rwandan government’s explicit recognition of genocide leaves less room for observing competitive victimhood, even though controversial memories exist, to a certain extent, in the context (Waldorf 2009; Orjuela 2019). Therefore, the Turkish-Armenian case offers better potential regarding highly contested narratives about a remote mass atrocity, as Turkish narratives about the Armenian genocide are not only oriented toward the denial of the Armenian suffering, but also underline Turkish suffering and victimization during World War I (Bilali 2013; McNeil and Vollhardt 2020; Shnabel et al. 2020).

The time period between 2009 and 2018, when diplomatic steps were taken toward a rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia (combined with a boost of reconciliation projects between the two populations), opened a window of opportunity to explore victimhood narratives at this particular time (Demirel 2018). Moreover, the individual case of Turkish-Armenian relations is relatively under-researched in reconciliation literature (for works on other contexts, see Stover and Weinstein 2004; Haider 2014). Thus, the selection of this case is also motivated by potential empirical contributions to the literature.
The remaining papers are inspired by several conceptual and theoretical contributions. The second case study, on Northern Ireland, is selected to showcase a reconciliation process after a low-level mutual conflict, which also represents an intermediate historical event. Due to the relatively successful consequences of the Northern Irish peace process, this case differs from other low-level conflicts that can also be included in the same category. For example, conflicts between Palestinian insurgents and Israel, as well as the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) and Turkish security forces, are still ongoing, and these cases are far from reaching meaningful attempts at reconciliation. One of the relatively successful reconciliation processes in South Africa may be an alternative to Northern Ireland as an examination of potential narrative variation. However, this case does not meet the first criterion, the ethnonationalism dimension, since a racial dimension and political apartheid were central features of the South African conflict.

Another possible alternative to Northern Ireland is the Basque conflict. However, the scale of violence was relatively low in this case (Berastegi and Hearty 2019), which made the potential development of victimhood identities dubious for the broader societies beyond the actual victims and their relatives. In addition, there has been no official peace or reconciliation process in the Basque Country. Thus, the inclusive nature of the peace process in Northern Ireland provides a unique opportunity to explore narrative variation from strongly competitive victimhood to more inclusive victimhood in this individual case, enabling a reconceptualization of the competitive victimhood concept and fostering the theoretical debate that this dissertation brings forward.

The third context, Bosnia and Herzegovina, presents an example of a reconciliation process after an ethnonationalist civil war. This recent historical event includes battles between armed forces and paramilitary forces, as well as the perpetration of ethnic cleansing and the Srebrenica genocide. Thus, the complex legacies of the Bosnian war bring richness in consideration of scales of violence, ranging from larger atrocities against civilians to low scale conflict between armies. Even though the success of the reconciliation process in Bosnia and Herzegovina is questionable today, the Bosnian context offers a relatively stable context for the analysis of competitive victimhood compared to other civil wars, such as that in Lebanon, which was interrupted by other forms of violence, such as invasion, and inter-state and intra-state wars in the post-war period (Chokr 2021). The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could have been considered an alternative to Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the lack of a reconciliation process and the high risk of violent eruption, as shown in the recent escalation of the inter-state war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, rules this case out.

The Bosnian context is also uniquely informative because it offers two intergroup case studies with which to analyze competitive victimhood narratives. First, Paper III, regarding relations between Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks, focuses on relatively inclusive narratives and showcases a post-civil war reconciliation with unbalanced impacts of violence on the Bosniak side, as they experienced the larger portion of
1. INTRODUCTION

killings, expulsions, and war crimes. Paper IV offers another example of post-civil war reconciliation between Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats after relatively lower scales of violence.

Importantly, the selection of these cases in the overall project does not aim to present a strict comparison. Nevertheless, when answering the second research question, the last section of this introductory chapter provides a reflexive comparison of similarities and differences in observing competitive victimhood across corresponding contexts considering the aforementioned criteria. In this sense, the overall dissertation is driven by an exploratory ambition to bring about rich theoretical discussion supported by empirical insights from individual case studies.

1.3. Addressing study constraints

Throughout this study, it is essential that certain limitations that may impact the scope and interpretation of the findings are addressed and acknowledged. First, writing a compilation dissertation is challenging, as the specific needs of individual research papers can develop into different angles that are broader than the research aims and questions. This situation, of course, is part of the richness that this type of work produces. However, it also entails limitations for the researcher in comprehensively discussing all the detailed overviews of the individual papers and proposing exhaustively coherent output.

Second, papers published in earlier phases of the project cannot benefit from the theoretical developments the researcher has gained through the later stages. Thus, the outcome of the thinking journey might be better reflected in the introductory chapter compared to the individual papers. For example, my writing process started at a place where the use of reconciliation efforts between Turks and Armenians was considered courageous, as it challenged prevailing perspectives on both sides. However, I reconfigured subjective meanings of reconciliation only after my academic journey from one context to another, as it can be oppressive when forced by powerful actors or unsettling when the victims “overemphasize” injustices. Moreover, the Turkish-Armenian case inspired me to observe narrative variation from competitive victimhood and create a typology to show variation in competitiveness. Nevertheless, the first research paper did not benefit from the competitive victimhood typology, which was developed only in the Paper II.

Third, this dissertation encountered a methodological challenge stemming from the use of diverse materials. While delving into competitive victimhood across diverse narrative units and materials offers invaluable insights into its manifestations across various contexts, it has also been necessary to omit certain actors’ perspectives in individual papers. Furthermore, as in many studies on ethnonational relations, this dissertation also faces the potential risk of oversimplifying the richness of perspectives into a singular viewpoint. While the narrative variation approach inherently emphasizes the diversity of voices, it is crucial to recognize the potential pitfalls of
ethnonational framings when alternative identities are not thoroughly examined and discussed.

Last but not least, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a dire influence on my research, significantly affecting various stages of the project, including the postponement of essential field trips and data collection due to travel restrictions, thus leading to delays in writing and publishing times. Similar challenges were faced in communicating research findings effectively within the respective research fields due to the cancellation of academic conferences and workshops.

Having outlined the aim, research questions, case selection, and study constraints of this dissertation, the focus will now shift to the theoretical discussion, where I will contextualize my research concerning the existing literature.
2. Situating the research in light of previous literature

In this section, I relate the dissertation to the existing research on reconciliation and competitive victimhood by synthesizing ideas from political science, social psychology, reconciliation, and memory studies. I explore how these pillars of literature amalgamate and shed light on my contribution to the theoretical debate surrounding competitive victimhood and reconciliation processes. I start with the conceptualization of reconciliation, then explain a narrative-based approach to collective identity construction and reconciliation. After conceptualizing competitive victimhood in ethnonational reconciliation, I finally proceed with a discussion on potential narrative alteration in competitive victimhood and present a new theoretical framework to understand it in post-conflict reconciliation processes.

2.1. Conceptualizing reconciliation

My initial interest in reconciliation emerged from a curiosity regarding how to build good relations between former enemy groups whose endless political discussions about what happened in the past continue to haunt the daily lives of ordinary people in various settings, from diplomatic relations to classroom settings or business trips. However, when engaging with these topics, the complexity of conceptualization becomes apparent. There is no all-encompassing understanding of reconciliation between scholars, who focus on various units, indicators, and conditions of a reconciliation process (Schaap 2008; Stover and Weinstein 2004; Strupinskiené 2017; Little 2012). At its most comprehensive definition, reconciliation involves transforming conflicting identities, constructing a shared vision for the future, utilizing various tools, and including multiple actors across different levels of society, including international, state, and non-governmental organizations, civil society, and personal relations (Hughes 2018).

Reconciliation has gained popularity in post-authoritarian and post-conflict contexts, especially after the 1990s, and it has designated diverse and sometimes contested definitions among scholars, peace practitioners, and conflicting groups. Some scholars link it to conflict resolution, restoration, peacebuilding, transitional justice, healing, and forgiveness (Meierhenrich 2008; Mitchell 2023). Sometimes they intentionally prefer concepts like conflict resolution and peace-making instead of reconciliation due to the latter’s ambitious connotation (Auerbach 2009). Reconciliation is sometimes casual, has no concrete definition, and is sometimes overly used like a buzzword synonymous with other concepts such as peace, healing, and restoring good relations (Hermann 2004, 41). While some scholars find the plurality of its meanings problematic to use (Ryan 2007; Van Antwerpen 2008), others tried to give
nuance to the complexities of its meaning(s) and contextual features (Little and Maddison 2017).

In this dissertation, I use the concept of reconciliation both as a process that indicates a transition from conflict to peace and as an end goal for restoring harmonized relations between former adversaries in an ethnonational conflict (Bar-Tal and Bennink 2004). It also implies a process including attempts at changing the nature of destructive relations, stopping new hostilities from emerging between groups, and preventing future violence repetition (Fletcher and Weinstein 2002; Clark 2009). Lederach (2005) also defines reconciliation in his book *The Moral Imagination* as simply referring to changing the nature of relations as transforming enmity on different levels that affect societies, including addressing the past and integrating it into a shared future, as is crucial for a peaceful conflict transformation. This definition resonates with the distinction between a thin and thick version of reconciliation. The former indicates short terms aspects of changing relations by achieving a ceasefire, a peace agreement, establishing new institutions, and a power-sharing system (Huyse 2003; Ackerman 1994; Dwyer 2003), although the latter is most commonly debated as corresponding to facing or dealing with the past and taking responsibility for misdeeds.

Accordingly, dealing with the past aspect of reconciliation includes a question of what subjective ideas/thoughts/narratives a historical memory includes within the social and political settings. To deal with often divided memories of former adversaries, some scholars of reconciliation suggest a future-oriented approach and a strategy of moving on rather than overemphasizing past injustices and conflict (Biggar 2003; David 2020) or building transcendent identities that can create a common identity between former adversaries (Verdeja 2012; Wohl and Branscombe 2005). Finally, those who focus on a thick form of reconciliation have argued for accepting a shared truth about the past as a way forward (Teitel 2000; Eastmond and Selimovic 2012; Fischer 2011). By one means or another, the reconciliation debate often revolves around clear-cut victim and perpetrator images that necessitate an apology from the perpetrators and forgiveness from the victims (Strupinskiene 2012). However, emphasizing these clear-cut victim-perpetrator images might be more likely when a particular side of the conflict exhibits greater violence and emerges as the victor after high-scale violence, such as mass atrocity. They are then very likely to set the peace design, dominate the narrative about the conflict, and marginalize or silence the viewpoints of the defeated. However, after changing violence scales, these roles are blurry and need to be considered from a broader perspective to understand intergroup reconciliation better.

Notably, reconciliation cannot be independent of power dynamics between individuals/groups/states. For example, it can be oppressive if there is a power imbalance between sides (Rouhana 2011). In such cases, powerful governing elites can reinforce prevailing structures onto minorities under the guise of reconciliation, or so-called reconciliation may maintain an unequal political system that led to the
conflict in the first place. For example, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinians oppose a reconciliation formulated by the Israeli government because they perceive it as a continuation of unjust, discriminatory policies imposed by the unequal power structure. In other cases, the less powerful side might be expected to give more concessions, and victims are forced to move on from their painful memories even though they are not satisfied with the reparations and justice received.

On the other hand, discussing reconciliation in terms of facing the past can be progressive in contexts where minorities are not marginalized and their historical suffering is not silenced. Therefore, meanings associated with different conceptualizations of reconciliation depend on the actors involved in the reconciliation process, their subjective perspectives, the injustices endured, and their opportunities to defend respective ideas about historical injustices. For example, reconciliation between two states can hardly be considered oppressive if these actors share relatively balanced power in international politics. Likewise, in the context of intra-state reconciliation among ethnonational groups, the potential for oppression is diminished when a power-sharing government offers equal or proportionate opportunities for representation to all involved groups.

Moreover, I recognize local people’s motivations to terminate conflict and build good interethnic relations despite interventionism scholars’ critical perspective on reconciliation as a phenomenon imposed by foreign interveners. I think local actors within the post-conflict societies equally own the agency in peace processes in their respective countries (Mannergren Selimovic 2019; Kappler 2015), be it with or without the support of external third parties. Also, a growing body of literature on hybrid peacebuilding shows increasing cooperation between the international community and local actors in peace processes (see for example, Mac Ginty 2010). Therefore, I am critical of those who view peace and reconciliation solely through the lens of forceful international intervention and fail to acknowledge the existence of local aspirations for peace and reconciliation. Reconciliation as a goal might be too demanding and arguably impossible to achieve, yet this aspect makes it even more relevant to research.

2.1.1. Why reconciliation and not transitional justice?

Focusing on the legacy of the past in post-conflict societies raises the question of transitional justice in the aftermath of violence. However, one needs to recognize the distinction between reconciliation and transitional justice. For some, transitional justice is a broader term used to indicate facing past-time violence, serving justice to the victims, punishing the perpetrators, and reconstructing society in transitional contexts. Furthermore, some scholars have considered reconciliation as an end period of transitional justice used to construct harmonized relations (Wittlinger 2018). For others, transitional justice and reconciliation are two separate ways to deal with the topics of the past with different strategies. I am inclined to make the latter distinction between the two concepts.
I have often been asked by transitional justice scholars why I do not work on stories of specific victim or perpetrator groups in my inquiry of competitive victimhood. Their suggestion mainly consists of investigating the competitive notion within individual victimization stories (mostly silenced ones) and how their narratives feed into collective memory. However, even though silent voices are invaluable in introducing nuance into our understanding of collective justice and memory, in this present dissertation, I am more interested in ethnonational group relations. Therefore, my focus is victimhood rather than victimization, a form of identity that non-harmed group members of a society can also embrace, sometimes even more strongly than the victims.

Transitional justice and reconciliation are significantly linked but differ in their focus on justice and impact on personal and collective levels. Criminal tribunals and truth and reconciliation commissions require the participation of individual victims and perpetrators (Stein et al. 2008; Druliolle 2015). For instance, trials focus on punitive justice for individuals, while truth-seeking commissions aim for restorative justice and amnesty for perpetrators. Restorative justice on a micro level is essential in bringing truth to victims’ relatives and amnesty to perpetrators. However, justice on an individual level can merely contribute to the collective via shared information with the wider community about how victims confront their perpetrators. Hence, their impact on broader societies is limited.

On a macro level, I position myself closer to restorative justice, which is a more comprehensive approach for wider society and future generations than retributive justice (Minow 1998; Subotic 2009). In a macro-level reconciliation (intergroup or interstate), the direction of interaction and reconciliatory steps are different because reconciling with the image of others being dangerous and unjust does not necessitate individual victims confronting their perpetrators. Reconciliation on a macro level is or can partly be a symbolic process, just like the creation of animosity towards others. However, this process can still include hearings of victims and perpetrators on a collective level.

2.1.2. Political essence of peace and reconciliation

Reconciliation processes of identity-based conflicts are both social and political in their very nature. For some scholars, reconciliation differs from conflict resolution and management because it goes beyond the formal, intergovernmental agreements, which focus merely on resolving the material problems in a conflict (Auerbach 2009) and requires transformation on a social and psychological level (Strupinskienė 2017). Scholars focusing on the psychological needs of individuals emphasize the sentimental and emotional dimension of reconciliation through healing, apology, remorse, empathy, forgiveness, and building personal friendships. For others, reconciliation is considered more realistic and political (Arendt 1958; Dwyer 1999; De Brito Gonzalez-Enriquez and Aguilar 2001). Hence, they focus on (re)constructing political structures through democratization and building power-sharing institutions.
between ethnonational groups (Ackerman, 1994; Crocker, 2000; Dwyer, 2003). A few scholars also emphasize the political aspect by examining individuals’ thoughts and beliefs about post-war institutions and trust in outgroup citizens (Brouneus, 2003; Huyse, 2003; De Grief, 2008).

This dissertation normatively underlines the importance of considering reconciliation from a socio-political perspective. I establish my argument aligning with the connection between reconciliation’s emotional and political dimensions. Apology and remorse are intertwined with cognitive elements in reconciliation processes, such as societal thoughts and beliefs, and often manifest in a discursive or narrative form (Auerbach 2009; Amstutz 2005; Tavuchis 1991). The phrase “changing hearts and minds” closely links with reconciliation, but hearts cannot change without minds changing first. Moreover, changing minds is inherently political in an ethnonational reconciliation process because thoughts and perceptions about others are inevitably linked to the memories of the identity conflict. Even in social settings, everyday encounters are prone to identity politics (Kontopodis and Matera 2010; Marijan 2017) due to people’s group attachments – felt or perceived – and attempts at creating interethnic friendships are not independent of politics. Furthermore, reconciliatory gestures on a national level appeal to individuals’ emotions. A public apology or reparation policy can relieve individual victims/survivors/relatives in a broader community from the burdens of an unacknowledged past. A political leader memorializing past harmdoing and dignifying victims can ensure the rest of society that similar violent acts will not happen again by encouraging everyday interactions in other social settings. Only when these steps are convincing enough can hearts change alongside minds.

2.1.3. The subjects of reconciliation

The nature of reconciliation relies on various factors, including the parties involved in the process. Reconciliation can occur on different levels, such as state-to-state, people-to-people, intra-state, and between a state and another state’s nation; it also involves multiple actors specific to each conflict (Heo 2014). These actors range from individuals (experiencing inner and interpersonal reconciliation) to civil society and NGOs, and from community leaders to political elites and diplomats representing different groups and perspectives (Hughes 2018).

When considering the past in the context of reconciliation, it is essential to ask whose victimhood and crimes are being discussed and whose recognition is necessary for conflicting parties to understand the historical events and reconcile (Teitel 2000). Transitional justice studies often focus on recognizing past misdeeds with reference to victims and perpetrators because justice, in legal terms, can only be achieved for those directly involved in conflicts. However, broader societies of involved actors and individuals who have associations with harmed groups can still feel victimized, leading to collective fear and hatred (Bar-Tal 2000). Therefore, intergroup reconciliation goes beyond the direct victims and perpetrators and must encompass broader
Analyze competitive victimhood. One can observe reconciliatory inclinations or recognition/denial in thoughts, discourses, attitudes, and narratives on micro and macro levels, such as individual speeches, small group interactions, and ethnonational politics (Lederach 1997).

Working on ethnonational groups and understanding their perspectives can be challenging because these groups are not homogenous units (Nagel 1994). Members of conflicting groups can have different experiences, resulting in a plurality of multifaceted identities. However, although the voice of an ethnonational group cannot be reduced to a single perspective, one can still observe the dominant and alternative narratives that convey common thoughts and perceptions among people who identify with the same ethnicity. This situation is especially valid in post-conflict situations where identity divisions are strong, and the bond between group members can create a relatively more unified voice, making alternative identities and narratives less visible (Kaufman 2015).

2.1.4. Approaching reconciliation with an emphasis on recognition

Some scholars associate the concept of reconciliation with a forward-looking approach and underline the concepts like forgiveness, healing, dialogue, and trust-building. In contrast, others associate it with a past-oriented approach and emphasize the need for truth-seeking, apology, empathy, and reparations as necessary conditions after conflict and war.

The role of attributions and perceptions about ingroup suffering and outgroup responsibility shape the ideas about moral superiority and expectations of who needs to apologize and who has the moral authority to forgive. According to Lederach (1999), apology and forgiveness faculties of reconciliation are based on Christian culture, which expects the first step taken by the victim to be through forgiveness. On the other hand, others highlight the magnitude of the events, the pain people who lost family members have, and the “impossibility” of pure forgiveness (Derrida 2001). For example, Arendt (1959) argues for the importance of forgiveness on a political level without forgetting. I think forgiveness is an utterly personal issue, and only directly victimized people and indirectly affected relatives can feel forgiveness. Collective forgiveness and healing may accumulate when many community members feel the same way. Nevertheless, it is hard to represent or offer forgiveness on a collective level. Instead, community leaders or politicians can only symbolically convey acceptance of the remorse expressed or apologetic gestures made by the perpetrator side (Daase et al. 2016; Lind 2008). Furthermore, emotional and justice-related aspects of reconciliation, such as trauma and healing, are more evident in other fields like social psychology and transitional justice.

The most prominent aim or last step of reconciliation from a political science perspective is frequently considered from a past-oriented approach to have revolved around either moving on from the burden of the past with a future-oriented approach (Biggar 2003; David 2020), or facing or dealing with the past and creating a shared
narrative between conflicting sides (Schaap 2005; Muldoon 2003). However, in most post-violence contexts, the subjective interpretations of the past maintain the conflict in the sphere of memory through remembrance of historical events, memory sites such as museums, memorials, and memory practices despite the peace agreements and political achievements (Assmann 2008). Furthermore, some scholars even emphasize that memory division between ethnonational groups potentially reverses these political achievements (Aboutaïf 2019; Bloomfield 2014; Rothstein 1999; Parlevliet 2000). In such cases, political science scholars have extensively examined and suggested ethnicity-oriented political designs, such as power-sharing, which give groups equal rights and proportional representation, thereby fostering inclusive historical perspectives (Chung 2022; Maddison 2016).

My own point of departure in understanding a thoughtful formulation of reconciliation begins with recognizing the suffering of others, be it through apologies, reparations, restitutions, political statements, memory politics, history education, or everyday conversations in daily social meetings. From a past-oriented approach to reconciliation that stresses the need for truth-seeking, apology, empathy, and reparations as necessary conditions of reconciliation, regardless of what steps were taken prior to others, the essential point within the latter category boils down to the importance of recognizing others, their suffering, assuring non-repetition, and creating a shared narrative about the past. Recognizing harmdoing can be done individually or collectively (individuals/institutions on behalf of the collective group). It might not be as effective as when perpetrators themselves recognize the harm, but it can still have a significant impact as a reconciliatory gesture from the representatives of governing elites or everyday people who identify with the same group as the harm-doers.

Public apologies or non-apologetic statements, offering or denying reparations, selective or inclusive symbolic remembrance, and history education can articulate a nation/state/ethnonational group’s standpoint about the past and shape what kind of relationship they seek with former adversaries. Not taking these steps, however, can maintain exclusive ideologies and sweep the resentments under the carpet until the next eruption of tension between groups. Therefore, these gestures are sometimes strategic or ideologically grounded and serve a common purpose: to indicate recognition and show a good intention to (re)build good relations (Kampf 2012; De Guissmé and Licata 2017). Recognition is relevant and helpful to the extent that it convinces the victims, victim relatives, and broader members of the victimized community that their suffering is recognized, and specific steps have been taken for atonement.

Recognition is a psychological need for victims of injustice and violence (Twali 2020; Nagar and Maoz 2017), but it extends beyond the individual. It can also potentially repair damaged relationships and rebuild trust in the aftermath of collective harm. Accordingly, it reflects on the socio-political sphere to ensure the non-repetition of violence in the future. Recognition or non-recognition can be evident in
daily conversations about politics, political statements, party manifestos, and policy
documents. Just like acknowledging and validating victims’ experiences and suf-
ferring, recognizing guilt and responsibility regarding involvement in violence are
individually and collectively relevant terms in reconciliation processes in the after-
math of violence. As a result, when there is violence, there is no space beyond the
boundaries of acknowledging or not acknowledging. Hence, reconciliation can be
considered even for future generations as they may have inherited unresolved his-
torical trauma or have been implicated in historical injustices even though they did
not commit violence themselves.

Rothberg (2019) distinguishes between recognizing guilt and acknowledging
responsibility and underlines the political responsibility of individuals for actions
committed on their behalf, even if they did not actively commit the harm. According
to this perspective, recognition necessitates a broader perspective beyond individual
guilt, extending it to societal responsibility and future generations. Hence, recogniz-
ing ingroup responsibility is critical to reconciliation and a just future. Rothberg’s
(2019) emphasis on the importance of acknowledging the responsibility of unin-
volved community members and the transmission of responsibility across genera-
tions to recognize the harm caused by the ingroup aligns with my approach, which
goes beyond focusing on individual victims and perpetrators to consider broader
group perspectives.

In light of this discussion, I think recognizing past-time suffering is the most cru-
cial element of reconciliation processes, as all reconciliatory steps commonly appeal
to individual and collective needs for recognition. However, especially when people
from each conflicting side have mutual violent experiences, even though the level of
violence varies from one case to another, victimhood claims on both sides of the con-
flict complicate the clear-cut victim-perpetrator images. The earlier literature often
focuses on perpetrators, on the one side, and victims on the other. In such cases,
apologies and reparations are expected from the harm-doer alone (Lind 2008; Brooks
1999). This situation can be more likely evident in one-sided exposure to violence in
the case of the German apology to Holocaust victims due to the unidirectionally of
the crimes committed. However, it is harder to claim unidirectionality in other
violence scales, and the literature falls short of addressing reconciliation and recog-
nition/denial of suffering between groups from a broader spectrum of scales of
violence.

To conclude, this dissertation deals with the past aspect of reconciliation in the
socio-political landscape of violence aftermath. It emphasizes the need for recogni-
tion in the promotion of reconciliation. Recognition gestures, be it through the
implementation of public apologies, state reparations, or commemorative practices,
aim to acknowledge past wrongdoings, emphasize the inherent injustice, and sym-
bolically promise non-repetition. In this sense, this dissertation speaks against the
scholars who suggest moving on from the painful memories of the past for the sake
of reconciliation. It also diverges from overemphasizing binary constructions of
harm-doers and victims, which requires reconciliatory steps and recognition from only one side of the conflict. This formulation limits our understanding of ethno-national reconciliation, which is often sought following different scales of violence that create multiple experiences of victimization and perpetration of harm on different sides of the conflict. Hence, it is imperative to explore potential boundaries of recognizing, non-recognizing, and negating the suffering of others and ingroup responsibility for harming them in reconciliation processes. I used these boundaries to define features of varying degrees of competitive victimhood in reciprocal relations. However, before presenting the thoughts that help to develop this new framework, I review how ethnic and national identities are narratively constructed and related to reconciliation.

2.2. Narrative identity approach to victimhood and reconciliation

Narratives are stories that combine values, beliefs, symbols, and communicative representations that construct individual and group identities (Ricoeur 1991; Somers 1994; Anthias 2002; Lerner 2020). Narratives shape the boundaries of selfhood and otherness; therefore, they are central to self-identity. Like individuals who tell stories to build their identity, collective groups and states also use narratives to construct group and national identities. Narratives convey psychological elements that help people explain the social and political world around them and convey emotions. Their embeddedness in ethnonational group identity can trigger conflict during intergroup tension and hamper reconciliation, as discussed above, when transformed. In this section, I elaborate on why I focus on a narrative transformation to approach reconciliation instead of an identity change.

2.2.1. The role of narratives in identity construction and conflict

Narratives serve as more than mere channels for expressing diverse stories and opinions regarding social events. Discursive and narrative emotional stimuli like fear, threats, triumph, and suffering foster a sense of unity among individuals and help construct collective identity. Narratives mirror individuals’ and groups’ worldviews, such as assumptions and ideas concerning one’s own and the other (Roy 1994; Ross 2003). They also work as interpretive tools that explain past events by selectively defining people’s experiences. They can also trigger emotionally-driven actions (Feldman 2001; Barthwal-Datta, Krystalli, and Shepherd 2023) and similarly shape what future actions can be politically and publicly acceptable and whether wrongdoing against others can be justified to the members of a collective group (Miskimmon 2017; Somers 1994; Anthias 2002).

Mainly defined as a “narrative turn” by some scholars, the past decade has revealed the narratives as essential tools for strategizing in domestic and international politics (Dawson and Mäkelä 2023; Hagström and Gustafsson 2019; Patterson and Monroe 1998). In this sense, narratives play a crucial role in the socio-political sphere, as an
inherent battle exists to establish the dominant public opinion (Barthwal-Datta, Krystalli, and Shepherd 2023; Ryan 2011; Orbe and Spellers 2005). Nation-building projects often construct collective memory via official historiography and national narratives. War and conflict narratives function in a way that groups portray the enemy as hostile and validate ingroup violent actions towards the outgroup. This way, narratives tie individual and group identity together, intensifying ingroup belonging, where alternative narratives potentially dissolve (Lerner 2020; Hutchinson 2009).

Furthermore, some stories can be selected explicitly in nation-building processes, while others are strategically eliminated. Volkan (1997), introducing the concept of “chosen trauma”, argues that the events of history are placed in the memory of nations in the form of traumatic memories. As they cause irreversible wounds in their national identities, this feeling of victimization constitutes the basis for the policies and rhetoric produced in the future. These “chosen traumas” pass down from generation to generation and maintain their vitality through discourse and narratives. Volkan (2006) argues how “chosen traumas” can also shape and justify national security policies. For example, some scholars discussed the memory of the Holocaust as one of the explanations for Israel’s extreme security-seeking policy against Palestinians, even though they were not involved in the Holocaust. (Vandermaas-Peeler, Subotic, and Barnett 2022; Lerner 2020).

Victimhood narratives are particularly persuasive and influential in politics and can lead people to remember the past, keep their fear alive, fuel their anger, and motivate them to cooperate (Jacoby 2015; Wang 2008). Such stories aim to appeal to nationalist and patriotic feelings, to manipulate past victimhood into destructive glories. For example, by employing narratives surrounding the Battle of Kosovo against the Ottomans in 1389, Milošević prompted long-standing Serbian historical grievances and forged a sense of unity among Serbs during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s (Bozic-Roberson 2004). Using the power of victimhood narratives for manipulation and destructive purposes under the right conditions can result in greater injustice and suffering (Ramanathapillai 2006). The feeling of injustice due to structural inequalities or past atrocities in different societies is kept alive through memories, narratives, symbols, and commemorations, which allow for the use of victimhood nationalism as a tool in diverse social and political environments.

The narrative about the past can also be inherently security-driven for nation-states. According to Mälksoo (2015), “the securitization of ‘memory’ as the temporal core of a state’s biographical narrative” highlights the narratives about the self and others and continues to produce new security dilemmas because others pose existential threats by misrepresenting the ingroup’s vision of the past. Although she underlines the role of a state-level securitization of memory, intergroup relations are no different. Whether in a democratic or authoritarian regime, the parties may compete with each other’s interpretation of the past by using the same events as a reference point (Langenbacher and Shain 2010).
Social memory consists of plural memories but is not independent of official memory. Ruling elites, intellectuals, and the media are critical to interpreting and morally assessing historical narratives, especially in generational shifts through promoted historical narratives, symbolic places, ceremonies, and educational policies. Therefore, government and political leaders’ ability to manage memory stems from their political power. Politics is a game of seeking power, as is the effort to legitimize the actors’ actions through narratives. Actors can, at any time, for any political purpose, open the box of social memory, extract useful narratives that rationalize their actions, and claim that their opponents are “unfair”.

Finally, one should still avoid giving too much agency to the political leaders in managing these narratives, as if they are produced solely for political purposes. It is crucial to understand that the strategic use of narratives does not mean that they are created out of the blue. Instead, they are produced through social communication, story-telling, and other discursive processes. Furthermore, their strategic use is only possible to the extent of their persuasive and emotional resonance with the crowds. Even hateful propaganda is only possible when social dynamics allow it. As political leaders are also the products of their society, a bottom-up effect also shapes the political elites’ and intellectuals’ behavior and preferences through the expectations of the audience they address. As a result, ruling elites and political leaders may follow their interests within structured value-norm systems. Thus, the extent that they have agency in shaping the official memory would depend on the context-dependent features of public narratives. Hence, putting certain events into the meaning structure can show an ideological stance. It can validate or challenge mainstream or hegemonic knowledge about the events by endorsing an “epistemological conflict” between conflicting sides (Dawson and Mäkelä 2023:2). In many post-conflict societies, sides continue their struggle to dominate the war narratives to defend their past wrongs or contemporary politics.

As narratives can play a role in the continuation of prejudice, intolerance, and hatred between groups, scholars of reconciliation have paid considerable attention to a narrative transformation in reconciliation processes (Auerbach 2009; Ross 2003; Simmons 2020; Cobb 2013), which inevitably means transforming conflicting identities and recognizing narratives of others (Strömbom 2014). They have argued that narratives can have a de-escalating effect just like they can have a role in exacerbating conflicts. Then a critical question guides the debate, namely whether an identity change is possible, and if so, what kind of a narrative transformation it should entail.

2.2.2. What should reconciliation consist of, an identity change or narrative transformation?

For some scholars, reconciliation necessarily entails an identity change to establish positive relationships. One’s identity, whether individual or group based, should not be inherently hostile to that of others (Bar-Tal and Bennink 2004). Therefore, they have suggested altering one’s identity to eliminate the negation or hostility towards
the other in order to move away from conflict-defined identities and achieve reconciliation (Kelman 2004). According to this approach, conflicting sides should reassess their identities to accommodate others’ (Kelman 2008; Staub 2008) or acquire new identities that transcend those previous fault lines. In this sense, alternative group identifications, such as an overarching national or regional identity, are suggested as promising for reconciliation between conflicting sides (Verdeja 2012; Wohl and Branscombe 2005).

For example, Gaertner et al. (1993) have debated that a common umbrella identity created between different social groups might reduce prejudice. In their study, they have emphasized the essence of “Americanism” to break the discrimination between Whites and Blacks in the USA. In another example, the transcendent European identity is highlighted as a fundamental value that unites all member states. Others have questioned whether developing common group perceptions in reconciliation processes can enable victims to forgive the perceived perpetrators. For example, in a research project on Jewish-German reconciliation, Jewish participants were asked to imagine Germans and themselves as joint members of humanity. Likewise, right- and left-wing group participants in Chile were asked to visualize themselves as members of the Chilean nation (Gonzalez, Manzi, and Noor 2011).

However, other scholars have found this supposition problematic because, as social identity theory sets out, images of self are shaped by the representation of a perceived other (Tajfel 1986). Therefore, self and others cannot melt into the same social entity. Furthermore, Shnabel, Halabi, and Noor (2013) have observed that the implementation of a transcendent identity is not as preferably embraced by the competing groups in post-conflict contexts, as ethnonational groups may oppose a unification under a bridging identity since they see it as threatening their existence. For example, most Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs see a transcendent Bosnian identity as undesirable (Kostić 2008; Shnabel et al. 2013). Similarly, Catholic Republicans in Northern Ireland resist identifying as British strongly, whereas Unionist Protestants view Britishness as a unifying identity.

In addition to scholars who primarily delve into identity transformation, some place comparatively less emphasis on identity. Instead, they focus on reshaping narratives related to different stages of reconciliation. They suggest distinct ways of expressing reconciliatory gestures through transforming narratives. For example, Auerbach (2009 297) presents the steps of a narrative shift to resolve the identity conflicts in the reconciliation pyramid shown in Figure 1. Auerbach’s pyramid offers ideal steps for former adversaries to follow to reach a narrative incorporation at the top of the reconciliation pyramid. The pyramid starts from acquaintance with the other’s narrative, followed by gestures such as expressing empathy, readiness for restitution, assumption of responsibility, issuing apologetic statements, granting forgiveness, and finally, a narrative incorporation. The applicability of this sequence might be questionable in different reconciliation processes, as Auerbach (2009) also mentions in her article. However, the more important point here is her central
argument that a narrative-based transformation might – ideally – be useful in reconciliation processes.

At the top of the reconciliation pyramid, narrative incorporation stands. However, how this narrative transformation can occur or what characteristics an empathy or a restitution narrative may entail is unclear. A similar problem is observable in the previous literature, with scholars who suggest constructing a single/shared narrative, yet without providing sufficient details as to how such a potential narrative variation be discernible (Garagozov and Gadirova 2019; Staub 2006; Schaap 2005). Furthermore, as previously discussed, the pursuit of narrative incorporation or integration to achieve a superordinate identity may carry the risk of being oppressive when imposed by a more powerful side of the conflict or an external intervener.

Figure 1. The reconciliation pyramid

Source: Auerbach 2009, 303

To conclude, narratives hold a central position in shaping ethnonational identity, and this centrality can trigger inclinations towards violence and create obstacles to reconciliation. However, they also have the potential to initiate and promote a reconciliation process. Research has shown ideas about changing narrative identity to create a common national or regional identity. However, focusing on altering entire accounts of ethnonational identities is impractical and often not preferable. More importantly, they omit the more intractable component of ethnonational identities, which is the main interest of this dissertation, namely collective victimhood. In addition, these studies have not adequately showed how a narrative variation manifests itself. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on the manifestation and variation of competitive victimhood across post-conflict relational settings. The following
section presents collective victimhood narratives embedded in ethnonational group competition, thereby describing competitive victimhood and foregrounding the debate that enables forming of a competitive victimhood typology.

2.3. Towards a new theoretical framework: narrative variation from competitive to inclusive victimhood in diverse post-conflict societies

The subsequent sections conceptualize the concept of ethnonational competitive victimhood. This conceptualization begins by elucidating the difference between individual victimization and collective victimhood, which accumulates into ethnonational victimhood. Subsequently, competitive victimhood is defined, encompassing the connectedness of collective suffering and collective perpetratorhood. Finally, a novel theoretical framework is introduced to facilitate the comprehension of potential narrative variation during the transition from conflict to peace in post-conflict societies affected by diverse levels of violence.

2.3.1. Defining collective victimhood vs. individual victimization

The dissertation clearly distinguishes between “victimization” and “victimhood”. The former refers to acts of harm and crimes committed by one person or group against another person or group, while the latter pertains to the internalization of experiences of suffering as a component of self or group identity.

Victimization of individuals or a group of people is based on the specific experiences of those affected, which can take several forms, from death to social deprivation, and from exploitation to oppression (Galtung 1990; Barton-Hronešová 2020). A growing number of scholars emphasize victim voices in post-conflict contexts and deal with the question of victim advocacy and justice for victims. Others shed light on different categories of victims and how diverse experiences of suffering are categorized in various ways by creating a hierarchy of victimhood (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012). Actors, ranging from state agencies, human rights NGOs, international organizations, researchers, victims’ relatives, and victims themselves construct these hierarchies by drawing the boundaries of defined categories to recognize rightful victims, thereby silencing others (Krystalli 2021; Ticktin 2020).

A hierarchy of victimhood matters in post-conflict societies, mainly because these categorizations implicitly show who has more moral legitimacy, who deserves material support, and who is more rightful in demanding socio-political change. For example, this distinction can be seen in post-conflict Colombia, where both FARC guerrillas and military members demand victim status, and in Northern Ireland, where the same situation arises between members of military and police forces and

---

2 These scholars discuss the conceptualization of innocence in terms of not knowing and being less agentive, impartial, not responsible, non-political, and a non-participant in war/conflict (blamelessness).
paramilitary organizations. These depictions are not only utilized to represent victims’ advocacy for various groups but also feed into the victimhood claims of ethnonational groups. A similar fostering can also emerge in gendered definition(s) of guilt, innocence and victimhood, as Helms (2014) shows in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, where women and children are often represented as innocent, powerless Bosniaks and perpetrators as male, brutal, monstrous Serbs.

In this project, rather than focusing on individual victimization, I examine collective victimhood as a group identity resulting from the victimization of group members, irrespective of the scale of the crimes committed against them. Collective victimhood occurs when an oppressor or perpetrator targets individuals because of their assumed membership in an identity group, such as an ethnonational, religious, ideological, or political group. This victimization extends beyond individual harm and becomes part of the collective identity. From an ethnonational perspective, collective victimhood belongs not only to those physically harmed and injured and their relatives but also to group members who identify with them (i.e., construction of victimhood by association). Group affiliation can evoke intense empathy with the injured or lost group members, transcending personal or physical closeness to the victims and enabling group members to feel empathy despite the geographical distance (Andersson 2006).

The invisible link between broad ethnonational identities and collective victimhood acts through accumulating and accentuating group members’ victimization stories. Aggregated stories have the risk of overlooking individual victims because when stories of suffering become a commodity of the group, the context and details of actual harms suffered by real people disappear, and their stories become useful tools to accommodate in increasing group unity (Kelman 2004; Ross 2003).

There is, however, an inevitable risk in this kind of group-focused research. One can never give enough justice to the plurality of different forms of victimization experiences and their narration. However, within contexts where ethnonationalism is the predominant setting of the socio-political game, non-useful victims and victim groups are often strategically left aside, ignored, and silenced. Furthermore, ethnonational groups predominantly highlight their suffering by referring to “peak moments” of victimization (Kahneman 2013). For example, the Srebrenica genocide is a more dominant moment in the Bosniak narrative since it represents a more shocking and peak moment in the war, even though numerically more people died during the siege of Sarajevo.

2.3.2. Understanding ethnonational competitive victimhood

Competition naturally arises around victimhood as in other aspects of ethnonational politics, with each side emphasizing their own group’s suffering and minimizing the suffering of others to establish the boundaries of the “most victimized” group. Therefore, competitive victimhood inherently refers to a situation in which victimhood claims are reciprocal; thus, it differs from “victimhood as politics” (Horwitz
ANALYZING COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD

2018), “politics of victimhood” (Druliolle and Brett 2018, 2) or in other words, the political mobilization of victims (Argomaniz 2017), because these terms generally refer to one or more groups’ political demands regarding their “victimization,” either from a government or a powerful group.

For example, Chatterjee (2004) has described the political representation of marginalized groups that cannot even attain citizenship status in India. Lynch and Joyce (2018) have touched upon the relationship between collective victimhood and political violence in Northern Ireland, while Berastegi and Hearty (2019) have offered a context-based model for categorizing political victims in the Basque region to show competitiveness among various victim mobilizations. However, this dissertation situates around the notion of competitive victimhood with reference to interaction and competition between ethnonational groups.

The concept of competitive victimhood primarily also differs from collective victimhood because the notion of competitiveness makes it relational and thus more complex. One-sided victimhood (individual or collective) can emerge even when there is no responsible other, like in natural disasters. For example, an earthquake or a flood may leave many deaths and injuries, affecting many people. Even those who do not lose anyone or any material assets may suffer psychologically from the pain surrounding them (Volkan 2006). In such cases, the suffering caused by natural disasters has no perpetrators. However, there are different intersubjective understandings of victimhood in post-violent contexts, mainly when conflict and wars occur among identity groups, which oftentimes create subjective perceptions of victimhood and perpetratorhood.

Many researchers have also examined competition over the victim status among different groups affected by common harm inflicted by the same perpetrator (Rothberg, 2009; Basic, 2013). For example, competition over victim status in Bosnia and Herzegovina has occurred among those who left and took refuge in other countries, those who had to migrate to different cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and those who did not have the chance to leave their towns during the war (Basic, 2013). These groups have competed over the status of “real victims” and an image of a “more victimized” group in the aftermath of the war. Similarly, there has been a competition among Jews, Roma people, Poles, and Serbs after World War II over who suffered more from the Nazi regime and who the “real victim[s]” were (Noor et al. 2012).

Moreover, competitive victimhood can also occur in remembering crimes committed by the same perpetrators at different times and places. For example, while Germany acknowledges Nazi crimes and the Holocaust, the German remembrance policy about Namibians’ suffering illustrates a different political attitude. Accordingly, Namibians have questioned why German authorities do not recognize the extermination of sixty-five thousand Namibians as genocide. They have criticized why only two memory places are dedicated to Namibians in Germany, while many museums and monuments in Berlin and other German cities memorialize the crimes
committed against Jews (Burke and Oltermann 2016). Similarly, it has been increas-
ingly debated why Holocaust memory is so central in the USA, while African
American people’s memories of victimization through slavery and structural racism
are ignored (Rothberg 2019).

These points show that competition over victimhood is complex in practice
(McNeil et al. 2017) and manifests itself in many relationship structures. It can arise
between individuals, groups, and internationally between diverse identity groups,
nations, and nation-states. It can take many forms depending on the relational and
contextual features.

The concept of competitive victimhood, as used in this dissertation, specifically
pertains to the dynamics between ethnonational groups during post-violence recon-
ciliation efforts. It is based on the reciprocal relationships between conflicting groups,
mainly where the identities of victims and perpetrators are complex and where wider
society tends to focus on the victimhood of their own group following violent
experiences. To put it another way, I perceive competitive victimhood as more than
just a phenomenon scrutinizing who the victim is. In a relational context, it is almost
equally important who the perpetrator is believed to be. The narratives around “we”
as a collective victim group and “they” as the imposers of “our” suffering become
competitive only when these thoughts are seen intersubjectively among conflicting
parties. Thus, competitive victimhood is relational and intersubjective in most ethno-
national settings.

In situations where both sides suffer human losses, there is a greater likelihood of
 elevating the victimhood of one’s own group while disregarding the losses of the other
group. Also, inherently recognizing others’ victims means acknowledging ingroup
perpetratorhood by challenging the positive feelings of ethnic group attachment. If
one side does not wear their victimhood as a skin, they might face claims of a
collective perpetrator identity. Contrarily, if they are blamed for being perpetrators,
they cannot be good enough victims with the moral power of righteousness (Buruma
1999; Ticktin 2020; Rudling 2019). This complex dichotomy causes tension by
entrenching victimhood beliefs and originating a resistance against recognizing
others’ suffering and ingroup responsibility for harm imposed upon them. Hence,
complex ethnonational victim and perpetrator images in post-conflict contexts
reinforce the sense of competitive victimhood between former adversaries.

Previous literature that analyzes competitive victimhood treats the research con-
texts as intractable conflicts in general and makes no clear distinction between an
ongoing violent conflict and a post-violence reconciliation process between ethnona-
tional groups. This dissertation highlights that focusing on the latter enables the
exploration of a narrative alteration more than what is conceivable in an ongoing
conflict. Moreover, intricate contextual differences grounded in the level of past
violence between groups and temporal aspects are frequently disregarded in com-
prehending competitive victimhood. Therefore, in this dissertation, I consider these
contextual dimensions in clarifying how competitive victimhood manifests and
Narratively varies in various ethnonational reconciliation processes. Accordingly, the subsequent section presents a thought process that paves the way for a novel competitive victimhood typology to observe the potential characteristics of a variation from highly competitive victimhood to more inclusive victimhood.

2.3.3. Introducing a novel framework: competitive victimhood typology

As discussed above, narratives shape ethnonational identities through stories of heroism and suffering, inciting justifiable violence during intergroup tensions (Fearon and Laitin 2000). They also perform as the most critical tools that transfer devastating memories of a sorrowful past to the future in the aftermath of conflict. The performative and repetitive remembrance practices can feed into the maintenance of a collective victim identity in social and political spaces. Therefore, there is a potential to prompt reconciliation when these narratives are transformed (Ross 2003). In other words, the expectation for a narrative transformation in reconciliation processes discussed above inevitably brings the question of an alteration in manifesting victimhood narratives into focus.

Collective victimhood is neither fixed nor constant. It can change by altering conditions and increasing social contact, interaction, and dialogue, manifesting itself in a discursive way and positively reflecting on intergroup narratives. As conflicting groups employ selective narratives to uphold particular understandings of the past, a change in political narratives regarding the past and altering the way of remembering is possible when political actors implement such policies; how groups perceive the past potentially shapes the future they will strive for. In this sense, many scholars see the transformation of memories, rituals, and even identities as possible through changing narratives as a constructive pathway for reconciliation (Kriesberg and Dayton 2012; Barkan 2016; Cobb 2013).

A group of scholars, who oppose the idea of identity change via creating a transcendent group identity in post-conflict societies, have questioned whether it is possible to create a common victim identity to unite conflicting sides around an understanding of mutual suffering (Andrighetto 2012). Noor et al. (2012, 363) have attached great importance to creating a “common victim identity” between the sides in overcoming competitive victimhood and achieving reconciliation. A shared understanding of mutual suffering (transforming a sub-category of identity) is partly different from an all-comprising identity change. In this sense, changing the “the only sufferer” image embedded in collective identity does not require fully participating in the other’s story and identity. However, it provides a space for accepting the

---

3 Emphasis on historical memory and remembrance practices in reconciliation processes conjoins with the attention on the international culture of remembrance, which especially gained importance after the Holocaust and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Promoting a global culture of remembrance consists of recognizing and commemorating victims, encouraging public apologies and statements, promoting new interpretations of contested events between groups, suggesting shifts in discourses and narratives, and thus evoking more positive emotions towards the other group (Harald 2013).
validity of others’ experiences. In mutual conflicts, this partial identity change can be valid for both parties by encouraging the development of a shared notion of suffering rather than replacing whole accounts of identities.

Vollhardt (2009) and Staub (2008) also emphasize the importance of expanding the perception of ingroup victim consciousness to include outgroup victims, which might create a different group perception that could overcome contested victimhood discourses. For example, Staub (2006) has shown, in a small group study on Rwanda, that developing a shared understanding of victimhood by revealing the historical reasons for the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis led to a realization among two groups that both Hutus and Tutsis were the victims of historical developments.

Dialogue, listening to mutual suffering stories, and thus meeting with a shared awareness of victimhood may provoke the consciousness of the common victim identity. This partial narrative change inevitably encourages individuals to understand that victimhood is not unique to them and that those they see as enemies also experience similar suffering. Ignatieff (1999) also stresses that a compromise could be achieved when the sides grieve one another’s losses. There are many examples of this transformative dialogue on the grassroots level. For example, the Parents Circle Families Forum (PCFF), a platform where Palestinian and Israeli families who lost relatives in the Middle East meet, aims to overcome prejudice and distrust among mourning families and ensure peace and reconciliation (Kohen Afya 2011). Moreover, as shown in studies conducted with Israeli and Palestinian participants, “common victim identity” and “common perpetrator identity” are likely to reduce competitive victimhood more than the “common regional identity” (Shnabel, Halabi, and Noor 2013; Nadler and Shnabel 2015).

I concur with the earlier literature’s focus on emphasizing a common or inclusive victim identity as more instrumental than altering people’s core group identity. Nevertheless, I am also intrigued by how a narrative variation might be observable from competitive to inclusive victimhood and whether a more subtle conceptualization of competitive victimhood can reflect more nuanced manifestations of recognition, non-recognition, and denial. The extensively debated conceptual duality between the two concepts in the previous literature, with competitiveness signifying conflict and inclusiveness symbolizing peace and reconciliation, has revealed a distinct gap in the existing body of knowledge. Hence, creating a refined framework becomes vital to exploring variation in victimhood narratives, as described within the primary aim and research question, to show the changing tone and intensity of competitive victimhood in post-conflict reconciliation contexts.

When there is competitive victimhood between groups, it is perplexing to initiate a reconciliation process without appealing to the specific identity-based needs of the sides in addressing the past due to the complicated self-esteem of the groups. Once more, let me turn our attention back to the scholars of reconciliation, who proposed adopting a single or shared narrative approach to the past in an ideal reconciliation context, often referred to as thick reconciliation (Clark 2012; Schaap 2005; Auerbach
ANALYZING COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD

2009; Strupinsiene 2012). In such an approach, perpetrators are encouraged to acknowledge their wrongdoing, demonstrate reconciliatory actions, recognize the identities and suffering of others, take responsibility, and offer apologies and reparations. However, a narrative of self-blame cannot always work efficiently when ingroup victimhood is also at stake. In such cases, recognizing others’ victims may create peer pressure, disfellowship, and accusations of being a traitor. Thus, narratives of recognizing others’ suffering can also mean challenging one’s group identity. This intertwined character of collective victimhood and collective perpetratorhood underlies why we need a refined tool such as competitive victimhood typology to understand variation in victimhood narratives.

To conclude, my definition of competitive victimhood encompasses not only the conflicting thoughts, perspectives, and narratives of suffering between ingroups and outgroups but also emphasizes the extent to which ingroups acknowledge or deny their wrongdoing against others. These factors consist of main characteristics that reconceptualize competitive victimhood and show potential variation from highly competitive to more inclusive victimhood in the competitive victimhood typology, as showcased in the presentation of Paper II. Furthermore, this analytical tool aids in examining the manifestation and variation of ethnonational competitive victimhood in different post-violence reconciliation contexts with varying levels of violence and diverse time periods since the occurrence of violence. Findings profoundly enrich the existing knowledge on ethnonational competitive victimhood and intergroup reconciliation.
3. Research design, method, and material

This part of the dissertation shows the research design, the methodological choice for data collection in each paper, a collection of different materials consisting of interviews, party manifestos, public opinion polls, official apologies, and various memory sites and practices where collective victimhood narratives were observable. I also explain how each case study comes together in a reflexive comparison before discussing the ethical considerations of interviews regarding access to research participants, informed consent, and confidentiality. Finally, I provide reflections on my positionality as a researcher.

3.1. Interpretive approach, thematic analysis, and analytical tools

An interpretive approach comprises a deep and exploratory method that appeals to the data by considering the interaction between the researcher's presuppositions and various perspectives within complex research contexts (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2012). The dissertation employs the interpretive approach to understand the subjective and contextual nature of ethnonational group perspectives, thoughts, and narratives regarding the main concepts of the research: competitive victimhood and reconciliation. Unlike positivist approaches that underscore objective truth-seeking, the interpretive approach regards people's meaning-making through specific individual and group experiences. Nevertheless, some components of human experiences, such as emotions and basic human needs, can transcend different contexts by enabling researchers to compare reflexively (Thompson 2010), reveal insights that can be relevant within multiple contexts, and draw lessons applicable elsewhere.

I view narratives as essential components of communicative practices that embody emotions, ideas, and perspectives related to understanding ethnonational groups and nations, both within the ingroup and in relation to an outgroup. In this dissertation, a theme-oriented analysis proves valuable, as the focus primarily lies on examining the meaning conveyed through the narratives rather than emphasizing the specific construction of identities and the influence of discourses shaping power dynamics. Depending on contextual opportunities and power distribution among groups, various types of narratives, namely dominant, predominant, and counter/alternative narratives, can emerge within a specific setting, which I call narrative sites, and these

---

4The power relations within a given context determine a dominant narrative. The actors who control the tools for disseminating information are the ones who create the discourse, vulgarize the narratives and shape public opinion. Predominant narratives are the widespread narratives with the highest representation in a given context without necessarily implying a position of authority or control. Thus, alternative narratives represent the narratives that diverge from dominant and predominant narratives. Dominant narratives are especially
facilitate written, oral, or symbolic communication. These contexts include interviews, media, public opinion polls, official statements, public speeches, party manifestos, texts, semi-elite meetings, memory sites, and memory practices (as presented in Paper III).

In the research design, I combine theoretically informed concepts as interview discussion points and empirical themes as inductively discovered ones. This combination is beneficial, as Bryman (2008) suggests that the insights from the empirical data could enrich a theoretical framework. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the papers consist of the reconciliation pyramid (Paper I), the competitive victimhood typology (papers II, III, IV), and a mapping of narrative sites (Paper III) to analyze the research material. I also draw on a qualitative method and utilize a thematic analysis to examine the prevalent data. A theme-oriented method helps identify common ideas and patterns available in the communication of collective victimhood (Ryan and Bernard 2003; Robertson 2017; Riessman 2007). The presentation of empirical results in each case study is reorganized around the emerging themes and attributions raised and emphasized by the research participants in papers I, II, and IV, while Paper III is presented according to narrative sites where more inclusive victimhood narratives emerged.

The third paper draws upon predefined categories of competitive victimhood typology in presenting narrative examples that enhance the theoretical discussion on weak-CV and inclusive victimhood. Narratives are mapped according to the sites where I explored relatively more inclusive victimhood. Here, what I map is not one story that emerges in different places. Instead, recognition-oriented and inclusive features that are revealed in different narratives make them a part of the mapping. Hence, the third paper is structured accordingly.

The theoretically informed concepts employed throughout the interviews are reconciliation, ethnonational relations, conflict and war-related memories, collective victimhood, politics of victimhood, and competitive victimhood. Additionally, the inductive strategy involves identifying patterns within the research material that reflect various degrees of competitiveness over victimhood, such as descriptions of suffering experienced by both the ingroup and outgroup, as well as the acknowledgment or denial of such suffering or wrongdoing.

Furthermore, even though all interviews are conducted according to pre-decided research concepts in the case studies, other documents used in each paper also feed evident in official narratives (leader statements, official declarations, party manifestos, history education state-sponsored memory sites). They may not become widespread narratives if they are occasionally created for short-term political propaganda. In this sense, personal narratives can converge with or diverge from dominant or predominant narratives.

5 Both discourse and narrative analyses are methods to analyze communicative units in studying ethnonational relations. Both methods have their strengths and weaknesses. While discourse analysis is more oriented toward how individuals operate language to establish and maintain shared meanings, values, and norms, it might be a more helpful method for revealing what power dynamics play out within the group and what positionalities these power dynamics entail among individuals/groups. Moreover, narrative analysis is better utilized to discover different storytelling structures in meaning-making.
into the reorganization of the emerging patterns by excluding underemphasized ones and including emerging ones. Research questions and the nature of the data being analyzed have also been compatible with a thematic analysis of narratives, and perspectives within this research’s aims and analytical-theoretical framework.

The reconciliation pyramid model informs us about theoretical presuppositions of hoped-for components of reconciliation and provides steps, although not necessarily consecutive ones, to evaluate a given reconciliation process by exploring the phases of peaceful gestures. Nevertheless, insights from the empirical analysis contributed to the competitive victimhood discussion with themes on remembering vs. forgetting, preconditions, mistrustfulness, and prospects for reconciliation in the discussion of competitive victimhood.

The competitive victimhood typology offers a theoretical-conceptual tool to show varying competitiveness levels of existing collective victimhood narratives. However, these levels should not be confused with degrees of a victimhood hierarchy determining who is more victimized than others. It instead shows subjective group understandings reflected in communicative practices. It presents a ranking of competitiveness by examining the extent of recognition/denial of outgroup victimhood and ingroup potential to harm others in a relational setting.

One should also not misinterpret the implementation of the competitive victimhood categories into empirical material, such as fixating certain actors into given categories. Just as various actors from same community can use fluctuating levels of competitiveness in their victimhood narratives, the same actors may use different levels of competitive victimhood narratives with regard to changing topics and reference to diverse time periods. Thus, subjects may also loosen or strengthen competitiveness by altering political strategies, contexts, and time.

The competitive victimhood typology also works well since predefined frames in the third paper offer an analytical tool, zooming in relatively more inclusive victimhood narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina. By using mid–CV, weak–CV, and inclusive victimhood categories, the analysis outlines predominantly existing narratives (mid–CV), enhances past research and explores rarely existing weak–CV and inclusive victimhood narratives. In addition to utilizing the relatively more inclusive categories of the competitive victimhood typology, Paper III draws on a mapping of narrative sites in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A narrative is a story that emerges in a place or space where communication about a story occurs. I call these spaces and places narrative sites. In this sense, mapping victimhood narratives is mapping the spaces or places where one can observe a narrative. All forms of oral or written communication (i.e., speeches, statements, texts, conversations) can convey a narrative that includes a topic like conflict, peace, collective victimhood, and reconciliation, on which this dissertation focuses broadly. The mapping of narratives in Paper III focuses on different stories that convey the same message or similar inclusive tone over victimhood. The mapping of narrative
sites is also instrumental in showing rare inclusive victimhood narratives and revealing overlapping characteristics in varying forms of narratives.

One can look at the narration of issues concerning suffering to see the victimhood theme. Competitive victimhood narratives consist of thematic ingredients of competition or relativization for the sense of collective victimhood. In this sense, competitive victimhood narratives distinguish from groups’ competing narratives, which encompass a broader range of characteristics associated with ethnonational rivalries. As for the specific observation of the competitive victimhood narratives, one can look at the explicit identifiers of recognition or denial of others’ victimhood. As this dissertation shows an unbreakable tie between victimhood and perpetratorhood within the frames of competitive victimhood debate, expressions of recognition and denial are equally crucial for the ingroup perpetration of violence.

Finally, the introductory chapter utilizes a “reflexive comparison” approach from comparative or multi-sited ethnographic studies (Gingrich and Fox 1997; Björkdahl and Kappler 2017, 6). Multi-sited ethnography is based on the assumption that, although knowledge is contextual, there can still be a conversation between different forms of knowledge from diverse places and spaces. In this respect, a multi-sited comparison enables scholars to realize similar patterns and differences within different contexts and aids in creative reflections that enrich theoretical discussions. This approach can benefit peace and reconciliation studies through which scholars try to understand the meanings of conflict and peace and learn valuable strategies from different cases to produce contextually-informed insights that can be useful in different contexts.

3.2. Material and data collection

The dissertation combines interviews with other documents such as public opinion polls, party manifestos, policy reports, political statements, memory sites and practices, NGO reports, and media outputs. Different material forms are compatible with the broader representation of competitive victimhood. Each of these documents is a different form of communicative tool that bears a narrative (shorter or longer) and conveys an interpretation of a particular event or situation. In this sense, even one sentence like “We suffered more than others during the war” is a narrative, and it tells us a story and shows attributions of recognition or denial in a relational setting.

Different documents also resonate well with one of the dissertation’s arguments that various actors can employ diverse degrees of competitive victimhood narratives. Accordingly, party manifestos, political statements, and policy documents help observe official collective victimhood narratives. At the same time, public opinions and interviews from members of societies show that social narratives overlap or diverge from everyday political speeches or political texts as represented in party manifestos. The selection of the type of material used in each paper depends on the research question and the gap in the literature. Moreover, each case study focuses on
different actors as sources of the narratives. Paper I on the Turkish-Armenian relations marks the members of broader society; the Northern Ireland paper focuses on political elites; and the first case study in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows diverse actors utilizing weak–CV and inclusive victimhood narratives. Finally, the last article examines semi-elite level narratives by showing distinction and overlapping features with official narratives.

Having been inspired by Wodak et al. (2009)’s discussion about national identity construction, I consider social and political actors, including politicians, civil society, media, and lay people, as creators of national or ethnonational belonging. Therefore, observing competitive victimhood narratives requires a comprehensive understanding of where these narratives emerge. Hence, the dissertation’s selection of material and whose narratives to focus on depends on the specific literature on the research context, the knowledge gap and the related research question.

3.2. Interviews

The qualitative and semi-structured interviews in the project illustrate subjective ideas about ingroup suffering and competition for dominating victimhood narratives. In the interviews, I first provided interviewees with theoretically informed discussion points of the study, such as ethnonational group relations, victims, victimhood, ethnonational/national narratives about war/conflict, peace and reconciliation, and politics of victimhood in each research context. In the interviews, follow-up questions helped redirect the conversation and clarify the most relevant points so that the interview stays within the boundaries of the research interest. As a result, I went through the transcribed interview material to discover thematic patterns specifically regarding the past violent events, the status of the relations, the competitive tone, and characteristics of attributions to the ingroup and outgroup regarding the historical violence.

During the field research in Turkey, I interviewed twenty people for the first paper; ten members of the Turkish nation and ten from Armenian society (both the homeland and diaspora). Participants were randomly selected and contacted via social media announcements on Facebook and Twitter (Baltar and Brunet 2012; Dalsgaard 2016). Interviews, albeit in small numbers, help understand the contextual features of meaning-making and individuals’ attributions to socio-political events (Bryson & McConville 2014; Suri 2011; Small 2009). The small numbers of interviews mainly help demonstrate existing narratives and bring nuance into broader perspectives when they align with the dominant narratives. Alternatively, they can illustrate alternative or marginalized voices excluded from the dominant narratives. Since the first paper used public opinion polls to show more representative perspectives from Turkish and Armenian societies, the interview extracts are used to illustrate detailed nuances of respective perspectives and separation from them when a significant narrative discrepancy occurs in the material.
In the second paper, I conducted ten semi-structured, elite interviews in Belfast between March and May 2018 while I was an intern-researcher at Co-operation Ireland. This peacebuilding charity organizes grassroots projects in Northern Ireland in collaboration with the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. My role as a researcher was partly embedded in the community since I lived in Belfast for two months and worked on several peacebuilding projects on the ground (on different approaches to fieldwork see Williams 2018).

The interviewees consist of representatives from the main political parties in Northern Ireland: Sinn Fein, the Democratic Unionist Party (the DUP), the Ulster Unionist Party (the UUP), the Social Democratic Labour Party (the SDLP), and community leaders and representatives from victims’ organization. All interviews were conducted in English at the places chosen by the research participants and kept confidential. I transcribed the interviews and removed identifiers that could identify natural persons from the material during my internship in Northern Ireland before moving the research material to Sweden. Finally, upon arriving in Sweden, I followed many academics, NGO leaders, and community leaders from Northern Ireland on Twitter. I also listened to weekly radio programs and podcasts such as the Nolan Show to keep an updated understanding of the political situation in the country.

Interview material for the third and fourth papers was attained in three separate visits paid to Bosnia and Herzegovina, mainly to Sarajevo, Tuzla, Mostar, and Stolac, for 45 days in total. I contacted and had Zoom meetings with many local scholars and members of the international community during the pandemic to grasp an impression of the political climate in the country. None of these meetings were analyzed in the papers, yet they fed into my understanding of the Bosnian context. During my visits, I conducted 32 semi-structured interviews with local people, including staff members of NGOs, museums, research centers, politicians, and community leaders for the third and fourth papers. The choice of interviewees hinges on their roles as local actors promoting both mainstream and alternative narratives. Interviews with politicians and community leaders are illustrative in investigating sides’ official and mainstream victimhood narratives. In contrast, interviews with the members of peacebuilding NGOs and research centers exemplify alternative narratives due to their role in advocating inclusive narratives. To contact NGOs, I drew on a list provided by Peace Insight. In addition, I contacted the Croatian National Assembly (an umbrella organization that works with all Bosnian Croat parties). All interviews were confidential, and all personal identifiers were removed from the transcribed material before being transferred to Sweden.

I am not a Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian language speaker; therefore, all interviewees were asked if they preferred the help of an interpreter during the interview, and only one interviewee preferred to do the interview in their mother language. The interpreter was a local translation and interpreting graduate who professionally interprets during interviews. The rest of the meetings were held and transcribed in English. To remove all personal identifiers from the transcribed material, I assigned a number to
3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.3. Documents

Analyzing documents, such as political party manifestos, policy documents, and institutional reports, is valuable to exploring mainly official narratives of political elites (representatives of political parties, political elites), which allows for interpreting and constructing the meaning of violent experiences during and after the conflicts (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). In addition, public opinion polls help explore commonly-held opinions among the members of national or ethnonational groups on a community level.

The first paper uses public opinion polls conducted in Turkey and Armenia in 2014 combined with governmental documents and reports from policy institutes. The material’s use not only reveals a representative picture of how Turks and Armenians predominantly perceive one another but also shows how everyday narratives diverge from official ones. The second paper draws on party manifestos over two decades, from 1997 to 2019, retrieved through the Conflict Archive on the Internet as complementary resources to the interviews. I analyzed 18 DUP, 17 UUP, 18 SDLP, and 17 Sinn Fein manifestos. In the third paper, official statements from an apology dataset, newspapers, civil society reports, and narratives from memory sites and memory practices retrieved from media were analyzed as complementary to interviews. The fourth article utilizes newspapers to track the Bosnian Croats’ narratives as complementary to interviews and document varying narratives and relations between Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks. These were the most suitable data in each case study that addressed the knowledge gap and related research questions.

3.4. Ethical considerations

In all interviews, each interviewee was given detailed information about the research and asked for their consent to participate before recording. I used my phone as a recorder with the permission of the participants and informed the participants about their rights to end the interview if they did not want to continue and withdraw from the research at any time prior to the publication of a research paper that includes an extract from the interview. The interviews for the research project took place outside of Sweden, and the transcribed interview material was subsequently transferred and stored in Sweden after removing all personal identifiers.

For the first paper, all participants were kept anonymous by assigning pseudonyms. Any personally identifiable details were removed from the transcribed material, and the recordings were deleted. In addition to the use of changed names, the ages were also altered for each participant according to the band of ages the data subjects fell under (i.e., 15–24; 24–35; 35–46, 46–60). Finally, the youngest participant
participated in the research with their legal guardians’ consent and supervision (in line with ERIC).6

As for the second paper, the research was conducted in Northern Ireland with political elites and NGO members. The rationale for the selection of research participants was their expertise. The research material was collected and semi-pseudonymized (i.e., according to research participants’ affiliation with their respective professional organizations). I only used organizational affiliations in the data collection and registration since, in most cases, the gatekeeper organization was arranging the time and place of the meeting and accompanying me to the meeting place without sharing the personal details of the interviewees. Nevertheless, as interviewees inevitably share personal stories in such small communities that might be problematic in terms of identifiability. I assigned each interviewee with numbers (Interviewee no. 1 to 10) indicating their professional affiliation only and removing personal information from the transcripts.

The data collection for the third and fourth papers in Bosnia and Herzegovina employs a similar confidentiality approach to Northern Ireland. I contacted most interviewees through their respective organizations via emails such as info@NGO-name.org. Furthermore, I registered the interviewees only by assigning numbers (e.g., interviewee 5). Finally, all interviews were conducted at the time and place of the interviewees’ decision, including the ones the gatekeeper organization arranged. The material was transcribed, and all personal identifiers were removed before processing and storage in Sweden. The transcribed material has been kept protected under the work account’s storage solution.

3.5. Identity, positionality, and reflections from field work

Many scholars advocate for impartial and unbiased research analysis in divided societies (Adetoun 2005). However, being completely neutral is impossible due to researchers’ subjective identity. Therefore, I employ a reflexive understanding of research ethics (Ackerly and True 2008) and active reflexivity of positionality (Soedirgo and Glas 2020) at every step of knowledge production in this research. All researchers are inevitably implicated in the knowledge they produce, so my positionality, regardless of the degree of my insiderness/outsiderness, reveals multiple facets and changing identities throughout the interactions with research participants (Merriam et al. 2001). Soedirgo and Glas (2020) have explained this form of reflexivity in three steps through a continuing examination of the self-positioning, others’ perceptions depending on the context and interactions, and finally, researchers’ assumptions about the first two steps.

Being considered an “outsider” or “insider” can significantly impact the interaction between the researcher and research participants, access to the research field,

---

and participants’ openness to talk. Interviewing research participants to collect data makes the researcher’s identity an especially vital dimension in ethical considerations. The role of insider/outsider is often context-dependent and associated with ethno-national, religious, cultural, and political identities (Parashar 2019), and the context-dependency nature of positionality can be complicated when researchers include different case studies. Hence, the notion of complex positionalities deserves some elaboration in the current project due to the various roles and positionalities brought by each case study.

Shehata (2014) highlights the implications of the research participants’ perceptions of the researcher in terms of bonding and othering. When research participants think that the researcher is an insider – a person who is one of us – trust-building is relatively more straightforward. However, an outsider, especially in politically sensitive contexts, must prove that they do not mean any harm, which might be challenging when people are biased against the researcher’s presupposed identity. The contexts in which the research took place in the present dissertation consist of insider (Turkey-Armenia) and outsider (Northern Ireland) roles, respectively. However, my research in Bosnia and Herzegovina reveals indirect insider and outsider roles, which are more complicated than in the previous cases.

My identity as a Turkish citizen who grew up in the most nationalist town – Trabzon – in Turkey might have been more implicated in the first paper on Turkish-Armenian relations than in the subsequent case studies. I was raised in a highly politically-charged family and educated with an understanding that “claims” over the Armenian genocide were just a continuation of imperialist Western countries’ plans to weaken Turkey. Nevertheless, I have a secular family background which always made me sympathetic to minorities in Turkey, such as Alevi, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews. I was always against the injustices and suffering that minorities had gone through in recent Turkish history, such as the Madımak massacre, which involved the killing of 37 Alevi intellectuals in 1993, and the Istanbul pogrom in 1955 especially against the Greek minority, which also affected Armenians and Jews in Istanbul. These events concerned only recent history, so they were not subject to elementary or high school history education, unlike the story of World War I. I have only encountered information about these relatively recent events from movies and novels, which supposedly helped me to open my mind to critical thinking regarding the topic of the Armenian genocide, which was once not open to dispute.

Having these positions settled, the first challenge to my denial mindset was the assassination of Hrant Dink, an Armenian journalist, in 2007 due to his writings and speeches about the Armenian genocide. The shooter was a teenager from Trabzon, my hometown. His loss was shocking even to those who defined themselves as nationalists, leading me to question nationalist ideology deeply. Witnessing the unfairness of Dink’s loss and the foundation of his murder was horrifying. No one deserves to die for what they think, and Dink was one of the most peaceful human
beings whose only purpose was to achieve more peaceful relations between Armenians and Turks.

Genocide denial, as a learned and taken-for-granted position, requires no critical thinking until a shocking event like Dink’s murder encourages self-criticism. Otherwise, there is not much reason or opportunity for everyday people to break the boundaries of dominant narratives by leaving their comfort zone within the nationalist narrative. I had no reason to question Turkey’s genocide denial narrative, that “the foreigners are all against us,” which most parties embrace regardless of their ideological stance. The day Hrant Dink was murdered, I could not escape the toxicity of ultra-nationalism. Even if this first crack did not wholly change my belief system, it caused me to look at historical narratives with more critical lenses than before.

The second challenge was early encounters with my first Armenian friend. My friend has deep roots in the Armenian Diaspora, which dates back to her grandparents’ tragic flight from the great catastrophe in the Ottoman Empire. Thus, it was overwhelming for her to become friends with someone from Turkey. Furthermore, despite never being very nationalist, I was still entitled to the official Turkish narrative against the Armenian genocide when I first met with this friend. Thus, the topic was the elephant in every room where we encountered each other, an excellent example of how politics haunts even social relations. As we became friends, we challenged each other’s reality and transformed it into a new place by acknowledging one another’s perspective. My idea of working on Turkish-Armenian relations only developed after this friendship. My journey might be considered an example of what Merriam et al. (2001) would argue is a life-long education impacting and changing the researcher’s positionality as it continues.

Throughout my research in Northern Ireland, I was noticeably an outsider. Even the Belfast accent took a while to get used to. Before visiting Belfast, I had only a general knowledge and understanding of the “Troubles” from a British state perspective, which defines the conflict only in sectarian terms as between Catholics and Protestants, occupying a great deal of space in security and terrorism studies. While different forms of Irish narratives have become much more tangible in Northern Ireland, different interpretations of history broaden my understanding of the conflict. Furthermore, I realized that even the British state abandoned the “terrorism” rhetoric. However, it was not that clear to the rest of the world apart from a bubble of researchers who either work on peacebuilding or adopt post-colonial approaches. Thus, as with any learning process, the research in Northern Ireland influenced me to see matters beyond the boundaries of the predominant international regime of a nation-state.

My implication in the research on Bosnia and Herzegovina is more complicated than that of the two former case studies – due to former Ottoman dominance in the region combined with the recent Turkish-Bosniak brotherhood rhetoric. Although I was not ideologically sympathetic to any nationalist ideologies, I still presumed that
nationalist Bosnian Serbs or nationalist Bosnian Croats, compared to nationalist Bosniaks, could have been more reluctant to talk to me due to my Turkish identity.

It is evident in the literature and historical and legal documents that Bosniaks were stigmatized as “Turks” by Serbs and Croats during the war in the 1990s. This identification of Bosniaks as Turks or Turks as “supporters” or “protectors” of Bosniaks (an association with the Ottoman Empire) emerged as one of the critical challenges that I dealt with in my presupposition when I approached Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since I am a Turkish citizen with a prominent Turkish name, I assumed Bosniaks would be more open to talking to me than Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats. This presumption was also articulated in my gatekeeper’s suggestion that I keep my Turkish identity hidden and that I only share that I was coming from Sweden when I talk to Bosnian Croats. However, I have not employed this perspective in order to uphold the transparency in my research. Otherwise, I have not experienced any explicit rejection apart from unanswered e-mails.

As a Turkish scholar, building trust with Armenian interviewees was the most challenging among all groups. My affiliation with a Swedish University – a university in a Western country that legally recognizes the Armenian genocide – was helpful as an unspoken trust-building mechanism. Similarly, in the Bosnian case, being affiliated with a Swedish University was also beneficial in breaking the ice with the nationalist Bosnian Croat community.

The notion of reflexive comparison was also a helpful ice-breaker in practice for some research participants. As I informed all the interviewees about the general purposes and overview of the research project, they initiated their talk by comparing their contexts with my previous research fields. Some interviewees from Bosnia and Herzegovina were curious about my thoughts on Turkish-Armenian relations. In such cases, I only shared the purpose and findings of the specific research paper rather than explicitly siding with Turks or Armenians. In an interview with a Bosniak expert, this topic was an ice-breaker because the expert assumed that I was against the Armenian genocide claims. The conversation continued with his identification of Turks and Bosniaks as common victims of the international community. According to the interviewee, Bosniaks were victims because the international community, the West, did not acknowledge their victimhood enough and awarded Bosnian Serbs by giving them a political entity – Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The interviewee continued that, likewise in Turkey, the international community sided with Armenians against Turks by recognizing the Armenian genocide. Thus, the participant perceived that both Turks and Bosniaks, as Muslim communities, were victims of Christian Westerners.

In another interview with a former member of the IRA, the interviewee asked me what I thought about Kurdish-Turkish relations. I was aware that the IRA/PIRA identifies itself with other leftist nationalist groups worldwide, including the PKK in Turkey, but I tweaked the question by highlighting that I only researched Turkish perceptions about Armenians, allowing me to redirect it to learn what the interviewee thinks about
the situation. I did not explicitly answer the question because I wanted to maintain my image as “neutral” researcher who is eager to learn. I always highlighted that I am in an interview to learn, which puts me in a subordinate position in my relationship with the interviewees. The strength of this method gives the interviewee a confident assurance that their narrative will be recognized and not questioned.
4. Summary of the research papers

Paper I takes its point of departure in the challenges of resolving conflicts when collective victimhood becomes deeply embedded in national identity and examines the narratives of competitive victimhood between Turks and Armenians, utilizing public opinion polls and conducting personal interviews with individuals from both groups. Drawing upon Auerbach’s (2009) reconciliation pyramid, the findings of this study highlight that Turkish-Armenian relations remain stuck at the earliest stage of the reconciliation process. However, empirical observations suggest that when grassroots-level interactions between Turks and Armenians are facilitated, despite the obstacles such as the closed border, there is potential for individuals to abandon competitive victimhood as members of national groups encounter each other away from the peer-pressure.

Paper II investigates a re-conceptualization of competitive victimhood and a narrative variation from highly competitive to more inclusive victimhood. By drawing on the studies that encourage a narrative transformation in reconciliation processes, as discussed above (Staub 2011; Pilecki and Hammack 2014; Garagozov and Gadirova 2019; Auerbach 2009), I propose a typology to illustrate the variation in victimhood narratives and argue that competitive victimhood can articulate in different levels. Scholars of competitive victimhood have shown how perceptions of ingroup suffering lead to the denial of outgroup victimization and ingroup guilt, particularly during ongoing conflicts (Noor et al. 2012). In some other studies, inclusive victimhood perceptions and narratives have been presented as a way of overcoming competitive victimhood and motivating reconciliation processes (Noor et al. 2015). All these points in earlier literature suggest that understanding the concept of competitive victimhood boils down to two defining features: how one depicts others’ suffering (recognition or denial) and ingroup harms imposed on others (recognition or denial).

In line with Simmon’s (2020, 27) root narrative theory, which emphasizes the function of narratives in divulging a “primitive” moral-reasoning, the competitive victimhood typology integrates a framework that shows the moral underpinnings concerning the recognition/denial of outgroup suffering and ingroup harm inflicted upon others to aid analytical observations. Therefore, a potential narrative variation is observable through these two defining features, as seen in Table 1. The categories of the typology are not static frames of narratives nor linear progress from conflict to peace. They instead show potential features of different levels of competitiveness that can be analytically discerned in collective victimhood narratives. Changing levels of competitiveness help understand a broader range of victimhood narratives, often
reduced to competitive and inclusive categories and go the binary construction of simply recognizing or denying others’ victimhood and ingroup perpetration of harm.

Table 1. The competitive victimhood (CV) typology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of CV</th>
<th>Defining features of CV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revengeful victimhood</td>
<td>• Depiction of others as deserving of suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Retaliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong–CV</td>
<td>• Non-recognition of others’ suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Non-recognition of ingroup guilt/responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid–CV</td>
<td>• Partial recognition of others’ suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Justification of ingroup guilt/responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak–CV</td>
<td>• Recognition of others’ suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Excusing of ingroup guilt/responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive victimhood</td>
<td>• Complete recognition of outgroup suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Full recognition of ingroup guilt/responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Demirel 2023a).

Revengeful victimhood, the first category of the typology, is a form of seeking self-justice through violent actions in response to ingroup victimization. This desire for revenge, driven by group-based hatred, can lead to mass crimes and genocide. Alternatively, they can motivate glorification of the violence within the post-conflict contexts. This intense focus on ingroup suffering results in dehumanizing others and portraying the outgroup as deserving of violence. In contrast, a strong–CV involves non-recognition of others’ suffering and hard-core denial of ingroup wrongs, which can lead to the degradation of outgroup members.

In the CV typology, mid–CV is probably the most common category observable in post-conflict contexts where both sides emphasize mainly their own victimhood and only partially acknowledge others’ suffering. Weak–CV recognizes others’ victimhood but excuses ingroup guilt/responsibility for harm done. While mid-CV justifies violence on the ground of its necessity, weak–CV acknowledges the wrongness of harm but frames it as a consequence of others’ actions. Weak–CV can also result in omitting the potential for ingroup harm and lead to the exclusion of group members in order to preserve a positive group image.

Inclusive victimhood is the most controversial among competitive victimhood categories and requires greater attention. It differs from selective inclusivity, which strategically associates with some victim groups while excluding others (Cohrs, McNeil, and Vollhardt 2015). Inclusive victimhood is also distinguishable from universal victimhood. Universal victimhood considers individuals’ motivations to com-
mit harm and argues for perpetrators’ victimization due to their lack of agency. In contrast, inclusive victimhood avoids conflating victims and perpetrators into a single category even though it recognizes that perpetrators also experience suffering. Instead, inclusive victimhood mainly informs mutual recognition of victimization and perpetration when applicable. The CV typology applied to Northern Ireland discovers characteristics of potential narrative variations in conflict-to-peace transitions in the Northern Ireland reconciliation process.

The third paper applies the CV typology in Bosnia and Herzegovina to explore relatively more inclusive victimhood narratives (weak–CV and inclusive victimhood) that could exist even after asymmetrical experiences of war. It demonstrates the importance of narratives in conveying viewpoints of weak-CV and inclusive victimhood in social and political contexts. It investigates existing inclusive victimhood narratives as a means to overcome competitive victimhood. The paper especially focuses on narratives about Bosniak and Bosnian Serb relations, where exposure to violence was uneven between former adversaries. Focusing on post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, Paper III explores the narrative examples of a variation from mid-competitive to inclusive victimhood narratives. In addition to the use of CV typology as an analytical tool, the paper utilizes a mapping of narrative sites as a methodological approach to examine narratives that shows accounts of acknowledging outgroup victimhood and ingroup responsibility for wrongdoing against others. The study suggests that peaceful coexistence might be fostered through narratives of shared suffering, even in post-war contexts with asymmetrical exposure to violence. However, the likelihood of recognizing shared responsibility in harming one another diminishes when the exposure to violence is highly asymmetrical.

The fourth research paper goes beyond the emphasis on competitive victimhood and utilizes the weak-CV and inclusive victimhood categories of the typology to investigate the memory-sharing domain of reconciliation. A case study of Bosnian Croat narratives employs relatively more inclusive categories of CV typology to discover boundaries of memory-sharing between Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks. Furthermore, it discovers narratives about the power-sharing structure in the country to investigate the link between memory-sharing and power-sharing in the Bosnian context.

The findings show that Bosnian Croat narratives about the war overlap with predominant Bosniak narratives concerning the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This overlap manifests itself in blaming Serbs for their aggression and recognizing Bosniak victimhood as greater than the other groups. However, the memory division is more visible when battles between Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks are narrated. Furthermore, narratives about the political structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina indicate that the political power parity established by the power-sharing design has not created the expected results. The limits of clientelist consociationalism generate political discontent, and new war-related narratives emerge to support or justify political expectations. As a result, the strife for political power can reverse relatively shared
aspects of the war memories on the Bosnian Croat side, as evident in the already shifting memory politics of the Bosnian Croat party, HDZBiH.
5. Discussion of findings, contributions, and directions for future studies

This section revisits the overarching research questions, presents theoretical and empirical contributions and outlines potential directions for future research. First, I revisit the research questions and discuss the findings. The answer to the second research question intrinsically involves a reflexive comparison of four case studies, synthesizing reflections and observations from each research context. Second, in light of the findings, I outline the contributions of this research. Finally, I discuss fruitful avenues for future studies.

5.1. Revisiting research questions considering the theoretical and empirical contributions

The overarching focus of this dissertation revolves around two research questions. The initial inquiry pertains to the narrative variation in the use of competitive victimhood and asks:

Q1: How can varying degrees of ethnonational competitive victimhood be conceptualized in terms of acknowledging outgroup victimhood and ingroup perpetration of harm against others in post-conflict reconciliation processes?

The primary objective of this dissertation was to understand and bring added nuance into the analysis of competitive victimhood by reconceptualizing it from an ethnonational perspective and considering varying degrees of competitive victimhood in post-conflict contexts. This dissertation has presented an elaborate comprehension of ethnonational competitive victimhood, emphasizing its relational nature. It has laid the groundwork for a novel conceptualization based on the interconnectedness of group perceptions regarding the victimhood of others and the perpetration of harm by the ingroup, particularly in the aftermath of violence. Acknowledging the victimhood of others inherently raises questions about the ingroup’s responsibility for causing harm to them. In this sense, as affirmed across all case studies, competitive victimhood in reconciliation processes is a phenomenon that needs to be considered beyond competition over who suffered more. It must be linked to the question of who committed what harm in these relational settings.

This interconnection primarily stems from the ingroup’s propensity to validate its own worth. People tend to resist acknowledging the victimhood of others, especially when the ingroup holds responsibility for the inflicted harm. Empirical evidence reveals that, in numerous instances within the research contexts where inclusivity is
purported, the approach to commemorating the past does not recognize the ingroup’s involvement in causing suffering to others. For example, memorials proposed as inclusive remembrance sites involving victim names from diverse ethnic backgrounds often omit the names of victims upon which the ingroup members inflicted harm. Therefore, the existing literature – which predominantly focuses on a binary framework of competitive victimhood versus common victimhood or inclusive victim consciousness merely as the absence of competitiveness in acknowledging others’ victimization – fails to adequately capture this phenomenon’s intricate complexity.

By underlining this gap, this dissertation has demonstrated that variation from competitive victimhood is observed at fluctuating degrees and explored at various narrative sites in Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina, enabling a reconceptualization of competitive victimhood in conflict-to-peace transitions, as manifested in the categories of the CV typology: revengeful victimhood, strong–CV, mid–CV, weak–CV, and inclusive victimhood. Outlining this novel framework for observing a narrative variation from competitive victimhood has offered valuable insights into the intricate nature of group perspectives within the research contexts, which are particularly pertinent in comprehending how individuals within a group employ victimhood narratives and harness competitiveness to differing extents. Of particular interest, the findings highlight that various individuals within a single group can engage in competitive victimhood to varying degrees. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that how individuals utilize competitive victimhood narratives can change over time and adapt to shifting socio-political circumstances. Among the range of case studies examined, deviations from distinct victim-perpetrator portrayals were less common within the Turkish-Armenian framework and regarding crimes in Srebrenica within the Bosnian context. This observation can be attributed to deeply entrenched and asymmetrical nature of violence in both cases, resulting in clear-cut victim and perpetrator depictions. However, even in these instances, rare findings indicate a narrative shift from competitive victimhood toward adopting perspective-taking between groups when contact and dialogue increase between members of respective groups.

Developing the CV typology has also enriched the theoretical discussion on Bosnia and Herzegovina, providing a deeper understanding of the narrative dynamics of weak-CV and inclusive victimhood as rare categories in post-conflict contexts. In particular, these categories expand the scholarly debate in line with one of the main arguments that this dissertation puts forward against clear-cut victim-perpetrator roles and a thick form of reconciliation in the study of collective victimhood (Schaap 2005). As findings show, the weak-CV category (i.e., recognizing the suffering of others without acknowledging ingroup responsibility in harming others) is a more commonly observed category than inclusive victimhood. Without exception, members of ethnonational groups in all case studies have had difficulty equating the responsibility of harmdoing by the ingroup and the outgroup. Therefore, shared
perpetratorhood (a component of inclusive victimhood) is seldom observed. Consequently, observing weak-CV narratives has provided a more realistic picture than inclusive victimhood in the post-conflict contexts.

Noteworthily, the categories of weak competitive and inclusive victimhood facilitate the observation of shared narratives in the context of Bosniak and Bosniak Croat relations. While the literature often debates constructing shared narratives between former adversaries as a final stage of reconciliation processes (Auerbach 2009; Ross 2003; Simmons 2020; Cobb 2013), empirical research needs more clarity on what these shared narratives may encompass. The findings underscore the possibility of examining shared memories by concentrating on narratives of collective victimhood, revealing that weak–CV and inclusive victimhood are valuable categories for comprehending the mutual viewpoints surrounding reciprocal victimhood and perpetratorhood between the involved parties. Moreover, this exploration goes beyond its initial scope and uncovers the interplay between memories of the 1990s war and Bosnian Croats’ stances concerning the political design of the Bosnian reconciliation.

The inclusive victimhood category in the typology particularly complicates our understanding of different directions of inclusivity and reveals the contextual limits of alternative narratives in Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, debates over victimhood hierarchy overlap with broader inter-group competition as the initial description of victims’ Olympics defined it. Thus, boundaries of collective victimhood and perpetratorhood are drawn along ethnic lines. However, in Northern Ireland, inclusivity is also debated as similar to universal victimhood (i.e., blurring the line between victims and perpetrators and considering everyone involved in conflict a victim), especially by some Republicans. Conversely, the Unionist community criticizes the portrayal of paramilitaries as victims. As a result, there is relatively more potential for observing weak–CV (shared suffering only) between the two communities in Northern Ireland, yet very little inclusive victimhood (shared suffering and shared perpetratorhood). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the division between a civilian and someone involved in violence is more robust as the latter is exemplified in either the glorification of national heroes or condemnation of war criminals and the former in innocent civilian victims’ manifestation as particularly overrepresented in the image of Srebrenica victims.

Q2: How does competitive victimhood play out in the socio-political landscape of reconciliation in various contexts with different scales of communal violence and changing temporal proximity to violent incidents?

This dissertation’s second objective was to consider contextual differences in terms of changing levels of violence and temporal distance from the conflict in examining ethnonational competitive victimhood across diverse reconciliation cases. The compilation of case studies shows that competitive victimhood emerges in different reconciliation processes despite changing violence scales, from low-level conflict to
ANALYZING COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD

civil war and mass atrocity. As demonstrated by the overall findings, despite varying levels of violence, both sides in each case study exaggerate their own losses and minimize those of the other side. This situation is often observed in the exaggeration of the numerical magnitude of the suffering, and if numbers do not work, then it is accomplished through the logic of the percentage of victims or the justification of harm doing that the ingroup suffered previously. However, the research also reveals contextual differences that potentially shape the level of competitiveness and conflicting sides’ expectations and preconditions of the reconciliation processes. The different angles each case study takes and reflections from overall findings reveal that my initial consideration of the scale of violence and temporal aspect can only be enriched by taking into consideration two factors: 1) asymmetry or symmetry in exposure to violence between sides during conflict and 2) post-conflict political power struggles in understanding the competitive victimhood narratives between ethnonational groups across different reconciliation processes. To comprehensively address the second research question, I now discuss contextual differences in analyzing competitive victimhood by reflecting on these two factors and the temporal aspect.

First, I examine reflections on asymmetry or symmetry in exposure to violence and competitive victimhood in different ethnonational reconciliation contexts. Scrutinizing competitive victimhood after a mass atrocity, a hundred years after the violence, is an important task that complicates the expectation of observing the phenomenon in relatively symmetrical mutual conflicts, within which experiences of suffering are balanced between groups. Reflections from the cases presented here indicate that defining or demanding recognition of a mass atrocity fundamentally connotes the one-sidedness of violence and unidirectional nature of harmdoing, whereas a civil war or a conflict potentially implies mutual harmdoing between sides even though sides may be affected at different levels. As evidence from this dissertation shows, when violence is not entirely unidirectional, and both groups perpetrate violence against one another and have casualties; each group can feel a deep sense of victimhood despite the asymmetry of violence. This finding is similar to previous research, suggesting that attributions to victimhood are a more robust group affiliation than perpetratorhood (Shaw 2003). Therefore, groups may exaggerate ingroup suffering more than they internalize ingroup wrongdoing against others, even when exposure to violence is asymmetrical between sides.

Among the four cases, relations between Turkey and Armenia represent a case within which competitive victimhood is observed in the pursuit of reconciliation after a mass atrocity. One can easily question the ethical foundations of claiming victimhood when mass suffering and death are on the other side of the conflict. However, most Turks still claim to have suffered at the hands of paramilitaries during Armenian revolts against the Ottoman Empire. The blame towards Armenians for betraying and killing Turks during World War I and the rejection of the term geno-
cide through the adoption of the relocation story is the predominant Turkish perspective.

The controversy about genocide is critical here, regardless of the term’s legal applicability in retrospective cases. In the Turkish conception, genocide is mostly denied with reference to the intention of exterminating all Armenians rather than a discussion about the victims themselves. Similarly, the predominant Armenian narratives show that their demand is recognition that they were targeted as a nation rather than the remembrance of individuals. The ongoing competition over the use and rejection of the term genocide seems to overshadow a more profound question about the immense unbalance of violence on the Turkish side. Hypothetically, even when one accepts the predominant Turkish rhetoric about Armenian relocation during World War I and leaves the genocide discussion aside, can suffering from revolts justify massacres and forced relocation of masses? This question is critical for anyone who identifies as Turkish to consider before diving into a fierce debate about denying the Armenian genocide and claiming further politicization of it.

Findings from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where competitive victimhood manifests itself after the civil war, reveal a similar question, albeit with more complicated claims of victimhood. Just like the question of the unidirectionality of violence in a mass atrocity, civil war reveals a similar logic when a more significant proportion of wrongdoing is caused by one of the sides, as exemplified in the Bosnian war with the Bosnian Serbs’ perpetration of harm against non-Serbs, especially Bosniaks, in the 1990s. The findings show that, despite the high asymmetry of violence, there is potential on the Bosniak side to recognize Bosnian Serb victims and Bosniaks’ responsibility in perpetrating violence against them, though limited. Furthermore, despite the disproportion in the experiences of suffering endured by the Bosniak population during the 1990s, it is intriguing that the official Bosnian Serb narrative about the war reflects a strong–CV. Conversely, the official Bosniak narrative appears to exhibit instances of weak–CV. This finding is perplexing, as it reveals a discrepancy between the intensity of competitive victimhood and the extent of loss and suffering experienced by these two groups. On the other hand, the war between Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks offers an example of investigating competitive victimhood following a relatively less asymmetric civil war. Findings show that Bosnian Croats – compared to Bosnian Serbs – have been somewhat more inclined to recognize Bosniak victimhood as greater than Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat victimhood, as they share a similar understanding with Bosniaks in blaming Bosnian Serbs for the initiation of violence.

This dissertation also has examined competitive victimhood after relatively low-level violence in Northern Ireland. Findings have indicated a reconciliation process with relatively symmetric experiences of conflict between sides. The conflict between the IRA, the British state, and UDA-UVF paramilitaries can be seen as somewhat balanced because harm was imposed mutually, and the consequences of violence left similar casualty numbers on both sides. As the British state and the paramilitaries
from both sides acknowledged and apologized for the crimes committed under mutual harmdoing, a related narrative variation is more observable in this case than in other contexts. However, narrative examples of inclusive victimhood rarely emerged in daily socio-political life. Crucially, even though there are instances of acknowledging each other’s victims and apologetic gestures, the prevailing narratives of Republicans and Unionists regarding the conflict align closely with the mid-competitive victimhood in the typology. This category entails a partial acknowledgment of the opposing group’s victims while justifying harm inflicted upon one’s own group.

Reflections from each context demonstrate that the victimhood issue and the debate about a hierarchy of victims were more related to individuals and what individuals did during the conflict in Northern Ireland than other cases. While individual stories have become less visible in the Turkish-Armenian case, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a context between the two. Stories of real people exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as a debate about individual victims’ rights and dignity and perpetrators’ responsibility and guilt. Nevertheless, the latter becomes less visible in the service of nationalism and evolves into mere numbers that politicians weaponize in their ethnonational appeals. In this sense, the debate on numbers has more importance in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkish-Armenian cases.

The analysis of four cases reveals that competitive victimhood emerges in reconciliation processes whenever there are experiences of mutual violence or claims of suffering based on subjective group perceptions, irrespective of the scale of conflict or the level of asymmetry in violence. This complexity stems from perceived victimization aimed at affirming ingroup identity, and in most cases, it adjoins to a politically strategized denial, as illustrated by Bosnian Serb leader Dodik’s narrative shift from recognition of the Srebrenica genocide to denial. This finding aligns with Ricoeur’s (2004) observation of subjective interpretations of right and wrong in all conflict settings, regardless of factual evidence. Consequently, we are confronted with a world where everyone has experienced victimhood to some degree or fears future suffering. Thus, the challenge lies in preventing victimhood from perpetuating further cycles of victimization. In such a world, would that mean proving that unidirectionality is the only way to convince perpetrators to actively hold onto their responsibilities to recognize and compensate for their harmdoing? As for mutual conflicts, should our normative goal lie in demonstrating that suffering and humanity, as well as harmdoing and inhumanity, are embedded in the histories of all ethnonational groups?

Second, the findings indicate that examining competitive victimhood in diverse reconciliation settings necessitates considering post-conflict political power struggles and their implications on ethnonational relations. Power is a complicated concept influenced by various dynamics within a given context. However, in understanding competitive victimhood, I consider political power from a perspective of ethnic groups’ right to exist, govern, influence decision-making, and defend and accommo-
date group voices and interests within a political system. Thus, power distribution in
shared governance simply means including diverse perspectives of groups, which is
often assumed – in the previous literature – to enable and facilitate shared narratives
between conflicting parties in the aftermath of violence. However, findings and
reflections from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Ireland show some reserva-
tions about that expectation.

The research findings reveal that change in political power distribution after the
cessation of violence in post-conflict contexts can lead sides to use, maintain, and
even reproduce victimhood narratives regardless of the scale, asymmetry, or sym-
metry in exposure to violence. For example, in Northern Ireland, where the
Protestant Unionist community has lost its privilege, increasing fears of becoming a
minority have triggered Unionists’ overemphasis on their victimization experienced
during the conflict and highlighted its continuation in the peace process, even though
the Catholic community suffered more casualties overall (Smyth and Fay 2000). A
similar observation is evident concerning Bosnian Croats and their increasing align-
ment with Bosnian Serbs’ memory politics. This alignment occurs despite Bosnian
Croats’ more visible acknowledgment of Bosniak victimhood than the Bosnian Serbs.

However, narrative examples show that discontent about political struggles reverses
existing mutual understandings about history. In such instances, the formerly weaker
side may relinquish its victimhood perception as it gains new rights, as observed in
Republicans’ narrative shift from more competitive to less competitive victimhood in
Northern Ireland. Concurrently, previously privileged groups may tightly embrace
their victimhood, driven by a loss of power and apprehensions of future mistreatment
or victimization.

Examining competitive victimhood by considering the power balance or imbal-
ance between ethnonational groups is intrinsically linked to the findings about poli-
tical control over the interpretation of history. As the common trope follows, winners
of war write history, and the past is remembered through their eyes, even though they
may have committed the most horrific crimes (Barkan 2005). The same is evident as
powerful actors control the tools for disseminating information, shaping the dis-
course, generalizing the narratives, and influencing public opinion (Ryan 2011; Orbe
and Spellers 2005). However, no ultimate victors of conflict and war existed in
Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Established power-sharing arrange-
ments have provided equal opportunities for ethnonational groups to convey their
messages about ingroup victimhood.

Overall, research observations show that the Turkish-Armenian case differs from
Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Ireland because the narrative power struggle
emerges in the diplomatic arena rather than within Turkey between the Turkish
majority and the Armenian minority. As the Armenian minority has almost no
influence in shaping the official narrative in Turkey, their primary expectations are
the developments in their daily socio-political lives, such as overcoming social hatred
and prejudices targeting Armenians living in Turkey. Therefore, the main narrative
competition that has been going on between Turkey and Armenia is more effectively run by the Armenian diaspora. Through their international lobbying endeavors to gain recognition for the Armenian genocide, the Armenian diaspora effectively counterbalances Turkey’s worldwide impact in shaping the narratives surrounding the events that transpired between Turks and Armenians in the early 20th century. Thus, the Armenian diaspora is essential in diminishing the power imbalance in international politics, as memory laws on the prohibition of denial of the Armenian genocide are adopted globally.

International support in recognizing the Armenian genocide unquestionably empowers Armenians to pursue recognition from Turkey. However, it also creates a counter-narrative in Turkish discourse that converges with the predominant Turkish narrative about resistance against Western imperialism, a component of Turkish national identity construction. A similar observation is also evident in Bosniaks’ demands for recognition and the Bosnian Serbs’ denial of the Srebrenica genocide. Bosnian Serbs and Serbian people elsewhere share a similar suspicion of international transitional justice mechanisms and perceive it as anti-Serbian, as previously shown (Mannergren Selimovic 2015; Subotic 2009). Both cases reveal a deeply intractable memory conflict and consist of the paradoxical question of whose recognition matters more. Would it make any difference if the whole world recognized the victims’ suffering while the real perpetrators continued to deny it?

Lastly, the temporal dimension enriches our understanding of competitive victimhood across various post-conflict contexts. The findings with considerations of reconciliation after remote historical, intermediate historical, and recent-historical violence indicate that group members on both sides in each research context maintain collective victimhood narratives, even a significant amount of time after the violence, suggesting that time alone may not alleviate the wounds. Victimhood as an identity component may persist without reconciliatory intervention.

The Turkish-Armenian case has provided an example of a highly remote historical conflict where contested narratives continue to impede even daily encounters. The narratives about collective victimhood on both sides reflect a second-hand memory. While Turkish and Armenian publics heavily rely on official discourses in the respective countries, members of the Armenian Diaspora pass stories predominantly through family ties. Northern Ireland is an intermediate historical case with living and second-hand memories, where those memories profoundly shape the nature of group relations. Finally, the two case studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina offer examples of recent historical memories of war, drawing heavily on narrative accounts of living memories, creating a plurality of narratives in the public sphere.

Findings show that memories of victimization are vivid when they are first-hand and detailed. However, the more the accounts of personal narratives lose nuance through time, the more they become shorter, less nuanced, and more easily digestible than actual stories. The observed differences between case studies reinforce the earlier literature reflecting that victimhood stories become national commodities, shape
ethnonational worldviews and, are easier to be utilized for political purposes, where narratives transmitted to new generations become harder to alter (Auerbach 2009; Roy 1994; Ross 2003). As a result, although time may or may not heal the pain suffered by the individual victims, the victim (ingroup) and victimizer (outgroup) role attributions bear the risk of becoming firmly rooted in the collective victimhood narratives as time goes by. Hence, the level of competitiveness in collective victimhood may alter through time and vary depending on the actors using them and under which strategy they are utilized. However, when stories of victimhood are simplified and integrated into identities as national commodities, the potential for variation in the utilization of victimhood narratives within the corresponding groups diminishes.

5.2. Contributions of the dissertation

This dissertation makes empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions to multiple domains of knowledge. First, by addressing the first research question, it contributes to the nexus of competitive victimhood and reconciliation literature. It expands our understanding of competitive victimhood with consideration of ethnonational relations in post-conflict reconciliation and shows the entangled nature of collective victimhood and collective perpetratorhood.

Second, thanks to this refined conceptualization, it offers an analytical framework, the CV typology, that shows features of competitive victimhood narratives with varying intensities of competitiveness. The typology profoundly enriches the theoretical debate on potential narrative variation in reconciliation processes. The inclusion of the five categories in the competitive victimhood typology enhances the literature by shedding light on the diverse levels of competitiveness evident in both elaborate and succinct victimhood narratives. Thus, this dissertation makes a significant contribution to the previous literature that presents no variation in the use of competitive victimhood apart from the absence of competitiveness, in other words, common victim identity or inclusive victim consciousness (Shnabel et al. 2013; McNeill, Pehrson and Stevenson 2017; Vollhardt and Bilali 2015). By prioritizing a narrative alteration against a transcendent identity change in the pursuit of reconciliation, this dissertation connects with the shared narratives debate within reconciliation literature. Hence, it makes a noteworthy theoretical contribution to understanding shared narratives in reconciliation processes beyond its conventional focus on the clear-cut victim-perpetrator images, pursuing a thick reconciliation that omits the mutual dynamics of ethnonational relations.

Third, the findings from all case studies demonstrate that the manifestation of competitive victimhood is overwhelmingly narratively oriented. Therefore, this dissertation reinforces the existing “narrative turn” within the field of political science (Dawson and Mäkelä 2023; Hagström and Gustafsson 2019) by showing that even political rhetoric and discourse refer to particular historical events and tell the
audience a story that conveys an emotional and morally loaded message about ingroup rightness and outgroup wrongness.

Fourth, unlike much of the earlier research on competitive victimhood, which does not clearly distinguish between ongoing conflicts and post-conflict environments, this dissertation deliberately focuses on post-violence contexts and presents cases where competitive victimhood is evident in the aftermath of violence. Concentrating only on post-violence reconciliation processes contributes an unprecedented perspective to our understanding of variation in competitive victimhood.

Fifth, as the second research question guides this research to a comprehensive analysis of ethnonational competitive victimhood across reconciliation settings, it contributes to the literature with an approach that combines case studies with different degrees of violence and varying temporal remoteness from the occurrences of violence. The temporal aspect of competitive victimhood reveals an irony as findings speak to the fierce debate in memory studies between the scholars who suggested that remembering the past cannot heal nations (David 2020), while others consider expecting the victim side to move on is ethically problematic (Mueller-Hirth 2017). This dissertation also contributes to the literature by elucidating the limits of mutual recognition of suffering and harmdoing in the case of reciprocal violence.

Moreover, this dissertation makes a noteworthy contribution to the intersection of political science, reconciliation, and memory studies by highlighting the interconnections between the political and memory aspects of reconciliation. It is a significant but unexpected contribution enhanced by the study, particularly in the context of Bosnian Croat and Bosniak relations. Hence, I did not extensively address the corresponding gap within the existing literature. If I simplify this gap, various disciplines focus on specific aspects of post-conflict contexts. Political science scholars assess the effectiveness of newly constructed institutional designs, and peace and reconciliation scholars examine the usefulness of intergroup projects. Furthermore, memory scholars explore contested memories and how different groups of people remember the past. However, what is often overlooked is the diverse groups’ thoughts and perceptions regarding the institutional solutions within the framework of political reconciliation. These opinions about the contemporary political structure are closely tied to how the past is remembered, and they play a specific role in the maintenance and production of victimhood narratives. This dissertation bridges the gap by shedding light on this connection and enriches the understanding of reconciliation dynamics.

It also makes manifold methodological contributions. First, it extends the analysis of competitive victimhood to the ethnonational and political level. It examines various politically relevant materials, including interviews with politicians, former paramilitary members, NGO staff members, and community leaders from the respective groups. Furthermore, analyzing party manifestos, policy documents, political statements, and public opinion polls demonstrates how different political actors may employ competitive victimhood in various narrative sites, including civil society,
memory sites, and practices. Exploring multiple narrative units also encourages the consideration of narrative divergence and convergence between official and public narratives.

Second, the methods used in this dissertation to analyze competitive victimhood differ from the dominant approaches in previous research. Instead of the commonly used method – administrating questionnaires with scales and focus groups to collect data and statistics to analyze the material (Shnabel et al. 2009; Noor et al. 2008; McNeill, Pehrson and Stevenson 2017) – this study combines thematic analysis with a narrative approach. By employing thematic analysis and focusing on the narratives, it brings a fresh perspective to studying competitive victimhood in reconciliation processes. This approach has proven useful by yielding valuable qualitative insights from each research context. Its adaptability to other contexts allows for a deeper exploration of ethnonational groups’ competitive victimhood narratives and perspectives.

Third, the CV typology emerges as a useful analytical tool to investigate victimhood narratives in conflict-to-peace transitions. Earlier literature promoting the idea of a narrative change in reconciliation processes does not offer tools to observe how to identify a potential narrative variation, except for tools concerning in which reconciliatory phases one can consider a narrative change, such as Auerbach’s reconciliation pyramid. The reconciliation pyramid covers possible reconciliatory steps but omits detailed accounts of collective victimhood. This dissertation employs the typology in Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina while demonstrating its potential for use in other contexts. The competitive victimhood categories can help process and organize large amounts of data to identify patterns and insights from various fields and provide new opportunities in investigating frequencies and comparisons across cases.

Finally, mapping narrative sites offers a methodological tool to trace where relatively rare weak–CV and inclusive victimhood narratives exist. The mapping is a revelatory tool that outlines multiple narrative units such as official statements, civil society documents, interviews, and finally, memory sites and practices. The narrative mapping model diverges from earlier studies focusing on only one narrative form and paves the way for future research elsewhere. Accordingly, the list of potential narrative sites can also be expanded by including grassroots sites, everyday narratives, media, and art. Art, with its transformative power stemming from imagination, may especially enrich the narrative examples of more inclusive victimhood categories in the CV typology.

5.3. Suggestions for future research

These research findings have prompted numerous questions that require additional investigation. First and foremost, using CV typology and narrative mapping elsewhere can enrich our understanding of altering dynamics of competitive victimhood
in conflict-to-peace transitions. Second, delving into the conditions that foster distinct categories of competitive victimhood across various contexts can present a captivating avenue of research. For instance, examining the dynamics between Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks reveals that assigning blame to an external entity diminishes the prevalence of competitive victimhood. Similarly, in the case of Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks, growing up as children of mixed marriages, political ideology and the locality within a conflict context may influence the likelihood of acknowledgment of others’ suffering and ingroup perpetratorhood. These contextual findings hold significant value, and their application to different contexts can enhance our comprehension of post-conflict reconciliation.

Third, this dissertation has reflected on context-related differences across case studies, emphasizing symmetry or asymmetry in exposure to violence as well as contemporary political power distribution between sides and temporal remoteness to the conflict. These factors are likely associated with competitive victimhood in reconciliation processes. However, more research should be undertaken before arriving at a more definitive theorization that elucidates this association. Furthermore, additional variables like class, ideology, and gender can enrich an understanding of competitive victimhood, especially when specific victim groups and their victimhood narratives are analyzed.

Fourth, one of the interesting empirical findings in this research is the similarities between Turkish and Bosnian Serb narratives that predominantly fit well with strong-CV and revengeful victimhood in the CV typology. These groups also similarly resist the international community’s support for Armenians and Bosniaks. Given this noteworthy observation, I strongly suggest conducting a comparative analysis of Turkish and Serbian cases, focusing on collective perpetratorhood perspectives. As far as my knowledge extends, such a study has not been undertaken previously. Relatedly, the same finding also shows the need for future research to understand how third parties shape the power dynamics in the aftermath of violence, thereby influencing sides’ preconditions in reconciliation processes, and how inter–national empowerment of specific historical memories influence the recognition and denial attitudes of groups in different contexts. The international community’s role in imposing shame and blame on perpetrator groups has been extensively studied in the previous literature (Barkan 2000; Subotic and Zarakol 2012). However, how the aspect of gaining and losing third-party support influences the tendency of acknowledging or denying ingroup responsibility, and how it associates with varying degrees of competitive victimhood, remain unanswered at present.

Fifth, this research focuses on exploring narrative variation in reconciliation processes as a part of its first objective. However, the distinction between how competitive victimhood manifests itself in a post-conflict situation versus an ongoing conflict is equally intriguing. In an ongoing violent conflict, revengeful victimhood might be more prominently evident. To thoroughly understand this aspect, further research is required.
Last but not least, I would like to conclude with one of this research’s most puzzling empirical discoveries. The examination of Bosnian Serb and Bosniak relations has revealed a predominant presence of strong–CV in the former and a notably weak–CV in the latter. The question is thus, how and when is the more victimized side further inclined to take more robust reconciliatory measures and acknowledge the victims of others? One possible explanation might be rooted in the more victimized side’s moral power. Another reason might be their demand for unity and aspiration for majority political power, contributing to their increased willingness to pursue reconciliation. Then does that mean it is easier to leave the past behind if victims emerge from the conflict as the more powerful side? While it is tempting to assume that the increased power of victims might facilitate reconciliation and closure, the reality might be more nuanced, given that there can be a significant gap between actual power and perceived power. I assume this distinction relates to how conflicting sides interpret history, perceive victimhood or perpetration within their own and opposing groups, and consider their aspirations for the future. Therefore, a further study on how perceived power is associated with ethnonational competitive victimhood is strongly suggested.

This dissertation has explored many interesting aspects of the compelling phenomenon of competitive victimhood, yet other intriguing facets of the concept remain to be explored in future research.
ANALYZING COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD
References


Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria.” In _Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences_,


Kosovo: The Role of Extended Contact and Common In-group Identity.” _Political Psychology_


victims of ETA and paramilitaries in Northern Ireland 1.” In _ETA’s Terrorist Campaign_, 125–142. Routledge.

Assmann, A. 2008. “Canon and Archive.” In _Cultural Memory Studies: An International and
De Gruyter.

Palgrave Macmillan.


REFERENCES


REFERENCES


2. Xavier Fraudet, Politique étrangère française en mer Baltique (1871–1914): de l'exclusion à l'affirmation, 2005
5. Håkan Blomqvist, Nation, ras och civilisation i svensk arbetarrörelse före nazismen, 2006
6. Karin S Lindelöf, Om vi nu ska bli som Europa: Könsskapande och normalitet bland unga kvinnor i transitionens Polen, 2006
8. Arne Ek, Att konstruera en uppslutning kring den enda vägen: Om folkrörelser modernisering i skuggan av det Osteuropeiska systemskiftet, 2006
17. Renata Ingbrant, From Her Point of View: Woman’s Anti-World in the Poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska, 2007
19. Petra Garberding, Musik och politik i skuggan av nazismen: Kurt Atterberg och de svensk-tyska musikrelationerna, 2007
34. Tommy Larsson Segerlind, *Team Entrepreneurship: A process analysis of the venture team and the venture team roles in relation to the innovation process*, 2009
37. Karin Ellencrona, *Functional characterization of interactions between the flavivirus NS5 protein and PDZ proteins of the mammalian host*, 2009
43. René León Rosales, *Vid framtidens hitersta gräns: Om pojkar och elevpositioner i en multietnisk skola*, 2010
44. Simon Larsson, *Intelligensaristokrater och arkivmartyrer: Normerna för vetenskaplig skicklighet i svensk historieforskning 1900–1945*, 2010
47. Michael Wigerius, *Roles of mammalian Scribble in polarity signaling, virus offense and cell-fate determination*, 2010
52. Carl Cederberg, *Resaying the Human: Levinas Beyond Humanism and Antihumanism*, 2010
70. Maria Wolrath Söderberg, *Topos som meningsskapare: Retorikens topiska perspektiv på tänkande och lärande genom argumentation*, 2012
71. Linus Andersson, Alternativ television: Former av kritik i konstnärlig TV-produktion, 2012
72. Håkan Lättman, Studies on spatial and temporal distributions of epiphytic lichens, 2012
73. Fredrik Stiernstedt, Mediearbete i mediehuset: Produktion i förändring på MTG-radio, 2013
76. Tanya Jukkala, Suicide in Russia: A macro-sociological study, 2013
77. Maria Nyman, Resandets gränser: Svenska resenärers skildringar av Ryssland under 1700-talet, 2013
79. Emma Lind, Genetic response to pollution in sticklebacks: Natural selection in the wild, 2013
82. Anna Kharkina, From Kinship to Global Brand: The Discourse on Culture in Nordic Cooperation after World War II, 2013
84. Oskar Henriksson, Genetic connectivity of fish in the Western Indian Ocean, 2013
86. Anna McWilliams, An Archaeology of the Iron Curtain: Material and Metaphor, 2013
87. Anna Danielsson, On the power of informal economies and the informal economies of power: Rethinking informality, resilience and violence in Kosovo, 2014
88. Carina Guyard, Kommunikationsarbete på distans, 2014
89. Sofia Norling, Mot ”väst”: Om vetenskap, politik och transformation i Polen 1989–2011, 2014
90. Markus Huss, Motsändets akustik: Språk och (o)ljud hos Peter Weiss 1946–1960, 2014
91. Ann-Christin Randahl, Strategiska skribenter: Skrivprocesser i fysik och svenska, 2014
92. Péter Balogh, Perpetual borders: German-Polish cross-border contacts in the Szczecin area, 2014
93. Erika Lundell, Förkroppsligad fiktion och fiktionaliserade kroppar: Levande rollspel i Östersjöregionen, 2014
94. Henriette Cederlöf, Alien Places in Late Soviet Science Fiction: The ”Unexpected Encounters” of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky as Novels and Films, 2014
96. Signe Opermann, Generational Use of News Media in Estonia: Media Access, Spatial Orientations and Discursive Characteristics of the News Media, 2014
98. Ekaterina Kalinina, Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia, 2014
101. Yuliya Yurchuck, Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Post-Soviet Ukraine, 2014
102. Hanna Sofia Rehnberg, Organisationer berättar: Narrativitet som resurs i strategisk kommunikation, 2014
105. Katharina Wesolowski, Maybe baby? Reproductive behaviour, fertility intentions, and family policies in post-communist countries, with a special focus on Ukraine, 2015
107. Larissa Mickwitz, En reformerad lärare: Konstruktionen av en professionell och betygssättande lärare i skolpolitik och skolpraktik, 2015
111. Björn Sjöstrand, Att tänka det tekniska: En studie i Derridas teknikfilosofi, 2015
118. Sari Vuorenpää, Literacitet genom interaction, 2016
119. Francesco Zavatti, Writing History in a Propaganda Institute: Political Power and Network Dynamics in Communist Romania, 2016
124. Ramona Rat, Un-common Sociality: Thinking sociality with Levinas, 2016
125. Petter Thureborn, Microbial ecosystem functions along the steep oxygen gradient of the Landsort Deep, Baltic Sea, 2016
127. Naveed Asghar, Ticks and Tick-borne Encephalitis Virus – From nature to infection, 2016
128. Linn Rabe, Participation and legitimacy: Actor involvement for nature conservation, 2017
129. Maryam Adjam, Minnesspår: Hågkomstens rum och rörelse i skuggan av en flykt, 2017
131. Ekaterina Tarasova, Anti-nuclear Movements in Discursive and Political Contexts: Between expert voices and local protests, 2017
132. Sanja Obrenović Johansson, Från kombifeminism till rörelse: Kvinnlig serbisk organisering i förändring, 2017
139. Alberto Frigo, Life-stowing from a Digital Media Perspective: Past, Present and Future, 2017
140. Maarja Saar, The Answers You Seek Will Never Be Found at Home: Reflexivity, biographical narratives and lifestyle migration among highly-skilled Estonians, 2017
141. Anh Mai, Organizing for Efficiency: Essay on merger policies, independence of authorities, and technology diffusion, 2017
142. Gustav Strandberg, Politikens omskakning: Negativitet, samexistens och frihet i Jan Patočkas tänkande, 2017
143. Lovisa Andén, Litteratur och erfarenhet i Merleau-Pontys läsning av Proust, Valéry och Stendhal, 2017
144. Fredrik Bertilsson, Frihetstida polisyskapande: Uppfostringskommissionen och de akademiska konstitutionerna 1738–1766, 2017
145. Börjeson, Natasja, Toxic Textiles – towards responsibility in complex supply chains, 2017
149. Roman Horbyk, Mediated Europes – Discourse and Power in Ukraine, Russia and Poland during Euromaidan, 2017
150. Nadezda Petrusenko, *Creating the Revolutionary Heroines: The Case of Female Terrorists of the PSR (Russia, Beginning of the 20th Century)*, 2017

151. Rahel Kuflu, *Bröder emellan: Identitetsformering i det koloniserade Eritrea*, 2018

152. Karin Edberg, *Energilandskap i förändring: Inramningar av kontroversiella lokaliseringar på norra Gotland*, 2018


154. Maria Lönn, *Bruten vithet: Om den ryska femininitetens sinnliga och temporala villkor*, 2018

155. Tove Porseryd, *Endocrine Disruption in Fish: Effects of 17α-ethinylestradiol exposure on non-reproductive behavior, fertility and brain and testis transcriptome*, 2018

156. Marcel Mangold, *Securing the working democracy: Inventive arrangements to guarantee circulation and the emergence of democracy policy*, 2018

157. Matilda Tudor, *Desire Lines: Towards a Queer Digital Media Phenomenology*, 2018

158. Martin Andersson, *Migration i 1600-talets Sverige: Älvsborgs lösen 1613–1618*, 2018


160. Irina Seits, *Architectures of Life-Building in the Twentieth Century: Russia, Germany, Sweden*, 2018


164. Ralph Tafon, *Analyzing the “Dark Side” of Marine Spatial Planning – A study of domination, empowerment and freedom (or power in, of and on planning) through theories of discourse and power*, 2019

165. Ingela Visuri, *Varieties of Supernatural Experience: The case of high-functioning autism*, 2019

166. Mathilde Rehnlund, *Getting the transport right – for what? What transport policy can tell us about the construction of sustainability*, 2019


169. Eva Karlberg, *Organizing the Voice of Women: A study of the Polish and Swedish women’s movements’ adaptation to international structures*, 2019


174. Renat Bekkin, *People of reliable loyalty…: Muftiates and the State in Modern Russia*, 2020

176. Patrick Seniuk, *Encountering Depression In-Depth: An existential-phenomenological approach to selfhood, depression, and psychiatric practice*, 2020

177. Vasileios Petrogiannis, *European Mobility and Spatial Belongings: Greek and Latvian migrants in Sweden*, 2020

178. Lena Norbäck Ivarsson, *Tracing environmental change and human impact as recorded in sediments from coastal areas of the northwestern Baltic Proper*, 2020

179. Sara Persson, *Corporate Hegemony through Sustainability – A study of sustainability standards and CSR practices as tools to demobilise community resistance in the Albanian oil industry*, 2020


184. Anna Enström, *Sinnesstämning, skratt och hypokondri: Om estetisk erfarenhet i Kants tredje Kritik*, 2021


192. Raili Uibo, *“And I don’t know who we really are to each other”: Queers doing close relationships in Estonia*, 2021


194. Mani Shutzberg, *Tricks of the Medical Trade: Cunning in the Age of Bureaucratic Austerity*, 2021


196. Philipp Seuferling, *Media and the refugee camp: The historical making of space, time, and politics in the modern refugee regime*, 2021


200. Vasileios Kitsos, *Urban policies for a contemporary periphery: Insights from eastern Russia*, 2022
208. Sophie Landwehr Sydow, *Makers, Materials and Machines: Understanding Experience and Situated Embodied Practice at the Makerspace*, 2022
211. Birgitta Ekblom, *Härskarhyllning och påverkan: Panegyriken kring tronskiftet 1697 i det svenska Östersjövälet*, 2022
214. Roman Privalov, *After space utopia: Post-Soviet Russia and futures in space*, 2023
215. Martin Johansson, *De nordiska lekarna: Grannlandsrelationen i pressen under olympiska vinterspel*, 2023
218. Lovisa Olsson, *I vinst och förlust: Köpmäns nätverk i 1500-talets Östersjöstäder*, 2023
220. Tony Blomqvist Mickelsson, *A Nordic sport social work in the context of refugee reception*, 2023
221. Ola Luthman, *Searching for sustainable aquaculture governance – A focus on ambitions and experience*, 2023
222. Emma Kihl, *Äventyrliga utföranden: en läsning av Agneta Enckells dikter med Isabelle Stengers kosmopolitik*, 2023
How does competition to shape historical memory persist and hinder reconciliation between ethnonational groups? Do the ongoing narrative struggles over collective victimhood always emerge with the same competitive intensity, given that groups experience varying levels of violence? If levels of competitiveness over collective victimhood differ among groups, what narrative characteristics do such differences entail in terms of recognizing the suffering of others and acknowledging ingroup responsibility for perpetrating that harm?

This dissertation wrestles with these questions. It delves into how competitive victimhood and its various expressions manifest in narratives within different reconciliation processes, specifically Turkish–Armenian relations, relations between Catholic Republicans and Protestant Unionists in Northern Ireland, and both Bosniak–Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat–Bosniak relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Providing a valuable framework for comprehending the dynamics of competitiveness within intergroup reconciliation, this dissertation explores the notion of recognition of victimhood and perpetration. In addition, it corroborates the disruptive impact of ethnonational power struggles on the prospects for reconciliation.

Through an analysis of interviews, public opinion polls, political party manifestos, political statements, NGO reports, and memory sites, the results reflect on the burden of collective violence between ethnonational groups and the vicious cycle it has created, which presents an impediment to the pursuit of reconciliation, even for future generations not directly affected by the violence. The results demonstrate that in post-conflict societies, a competition over how to remember the past emerges, regardless of the level of violence between ethnonational groups. Empirical evidence demonstrates that the asymmetry/symmetry of violence between the groups and contemporary political power struggles are more likely than the scale of violence to influence the intensity of competitiveness.

Cagla Demirel is a political scientist and peace researcher at the School of Social Sciences, Södertörn University. This study represents her doctoral dissertation within the research area of Politics, Economy and the Organisation of Society (PESO), and the Baltic and East European Graduate School (BEEGS).