Factors of Ethnic Distance: A Systematic Scoping Review

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Abstract: Identifying factors determining ethnic distance is a perennial quest in ethnic studies. This is important not only from a theoretical perspective but also as a basis for developing practical interventions aimed at decreasing ethnic distance, which could, in turn, lead to increased tolerance and social peace. Building on existing research, we conducted a systematic scoping review of 30 studies to identify prevalent factors and variables that significantly impact individuals' ethnic distance. According to our study, the most relevant variables are gender, education, income, age, interethnic contact, war experience, following news in the media, religious commitment, religious denomination, and political orientation. The analysis has shown that these variables can be grouped into four distinct factors: sociodemography, exposure, religion, and politics. However, none of the factors and variables identified were found to be universally applicable, as the cause of ethnic distance is multifactorial and context-dependent. We mapped the characteristics of existing studies, focusing on any indication of psychological mechanisms driving the changes in interethnic (in)tolerance. Most of the studies reviewed were based on the Bogardus scale, a commonly used tool for measuring ethnic distance.
Keywords: ethnic distance, social distance, Bogardus scale, ethnic factors, ethnic variables.

In today's societies, social conflicts remain omnipresent, highlighting the need to strengthen our efforts to improve mutual understanding. Although the causes of conflict vary widely, they are often driven by a strong ethnic component. This is even more pronounced in post-conflict societies where interethnic violence has severed ties between ethnic groups. Years after the cessation of armed hostilities, such communities remain divided along ethnic lines – physically, symbolically, or both. Although such places are subject to various reconciliation initiatives and other peacebuilding efforts, the ethnic distance (as one of the most specific types of social distance) between the people previously involved in armed conflict and so-called post-conflict anxieties remains high. Yet some societies, or parts of them, manage to overcome interethnic animosity, reduce ethnic distance, and find some degree of coexistence, while others do not (Djordjević & Zupančič, 2024; Kočan et al., 2024).

The degree of "understanding and intimacy which characterize personal and social relations," has been influentially conceptualized by Park (1924) as "social distance" and is

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closely linked to the concepts of race and class. Soon after, a systematic study of social distance commenced with Bogardus (1925) and his pioneering research on *Measuring Social Distance*. Bogardus conceived a seven-item scale to measure willingness to accept or refuse different types of relationships with members of other groups. Given a variety of groups to consider, participants are asked to specify their acceptance or refusal of various kinds of relationships, usually ranging from exile from one's country on one end to marriage into one's family on the other. Typical questionnaires include a list of questions such as "Would you accept a member of X ethnicity as a citizen in your country?" "Would you accept a member of X ethnicity as a neighbor?" and "Would you accept a member of X ethnicity as a spouse?" The answers of a particular respondent are being directly used as an indication of his or her social distance, which can then be used in statistical analysis. Since the Bogardus scale is a cumulative (Guttman) scale, a positive response to any question implies a positive response to all preceding questions. In other words, the scale assumes a hierarchical structure, where agreement with a particular statement indicates agreement with all statements before it. Despite some limitations, researchers worldwide have adopted, adapted, and employed Bogardus's relatively simple research instrument. Even a century after its creation, the scale remains a powerful tool to survey "the degrees and grades of understanding and feeling that persons experience regarding each other. It explains the nature of a great deal of their interaction. It charts the character of social relations" (Bogardus, 1925, p. 299).

Although Bogardus's (1925) scale can be used to measure perceived distances associated with very different categories such as age, gender, profession, and religion, it is predominantly used to measure closeness or remoteness in terms of ethnicity. In this respect, researchers are interested in various data, such as the overall mean ethnic distance scores or social distance rankings of different ethnic groups. Moreover, one of the most important contributions of such studies is that the researchers can often identify correlations and, thus, factors that significantly affect ethnic distance. This brings us to the question of generalization – what are the most frequently identified factors of ethnic distance in such studies? Are they common and universally applicable, or do they differ from case to case? Do the authors agree on their explanatory power and, thus, importance? These are the research questions leading our study.

While there is a considerable body of research, only a handful of contemporary authors address factors of ethnic distance in a truly generalized manner. For instance, Winnick (2019) noted a pattern summarized in original Bogardus' studies that

> *in general, demographic characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, and educational achievement were found to shape the magnitude of desired social distance, as well as familiarity with the target group and the extent to which discomfort or a sense of threat is provoked. Evaluations also tended to mirror current events and cultural sensibilities during the period when the research is conducted. (p. 2)*

Although several authors (especially those who have carried out longitudinal studies) did cross-reference the results and made generalizations based on their research, a lack of review studies focusing on factors of ethnic distance is evident in the field.[3] As the existing literature lacks a comprehensive framework for categorizing the diverse array of factors influencing ethnic distance, we seek to identify, classify, and characterize the empirical

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[3] In a preliminary (re)search, using Google Scholar and the digital library (see footnote 6), we found that search terms such as "factors of ethnic distance" and "variables of ethnic distance" yield a large number of original research papers, while the results of these studies are scarcely synthesized in the form of literature reviews. With this in mind, we set out to produce a review that would provide a snapshot of the topic in question, yet be methodological, replicable, and specific enough to serve as a reliable basis for our further research.

evidence. Research that synthesizes the existing studies on ethnic distance would evidentially be highly beneficial, as it would not only allow for the categorization of factors and variables, but also provide a comprehensive basis for further exploring the applicability of different concepts, theories, and models. Our study attempts to address this literature gap through a scoping yet systematic review.

Aim and Methods

The study supporting this article was conducted during the initial phase of the Anxious Peace research project, which, among others, strived to develop an innovative, practical model for reducing ethnic distance in post-conflict societies.[4] To create the model, the research team needed to identify the factors that potentially affect ethnic distance. In addition, the research team sought to identify research gaps and map characteristics of the existing studies, such as country of publication, study design, and possible recommendations for field interventions to reduce ethnic distance.

Given the need to identify the extent and essential characteristics of ethnic distance in the already published research, we chose a scoping literature review as the primary research method (see Booth et al., 2012; Mak & Thomas, 2022). In addition, we employed several measures to improve the systematicity of the research to increase its clarity, validity, and auditability. In this manner, we have planned for a methodical literature search (with predefined search terms in a scientific repository/library), carried out a quality assessment of potentially relevant search results (the main criterion was whether the publication is peer-reviewed), while the presentation of the review findings combined a narrative and tabular format.[5] The analysis was carried out by a pair of researchers, which further reduced the risk of bias. This way, we increased the likelihood that this review is more methodical, objective, structured, and reproducible. Although most of the research in the field of ethnic studies is either done quantitatively or by using mixed methods, these results are not easily comparable in terms of numerical values. However, for our project, such comparison was never necessary as we were most interested in non-numerical characteristics, in particular, the prevalence of the factors identified and in possible indications of the mechanisms driving them.

To carry out the scoping review, we reviewed abstracts of 800 search hits in the DiKUL digital library.[6] Four search queries were used: *ethnic distance*, *social distance*, *Bogardus scale*,

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[4] Anxious Peace (Anxieties in cities of Southeast European post-conflict societies: Introducing an integrative approach to peacebuilding) was a research project carried out at the University of Ljubljana between 2021 and 2024. The project aimed to answer the question of how to reduce the ethnic distance between the people previously involved in armed conflicts and, overall, improve interethnic relations in post-conflict societies (Djordjević & Zupančič, 2024; Kočan & Zupančič, 2024).

[5] Scoping reviews provide a snapshot of a topic by identifying the type and extent of existing research. Scoping reviews are primarily conducted using database searches to answer questions such as: How much evidence is there in the literature? What type of evidence is it? What are the dominant concepts? Although scoping reviews are often carried out to inform decisions about subsequent specific (systematic) reviews, they are also useful in their own right. Moreover, by employing measures of systematicity, it is hoped that such a review will address some questions that are typically answered by full systematic reviews (i.e., description and credibility of the evidence, relationships between variables, research gaps, conflicting results) (Booth et al., 2012; Mak & Thomas, 2022). Although scoping reviews are not necessarily limited to peer-reviewed literature, in our case, we did not consider grey literature as it is less likely to contain relevant findings.

[6] DiKUL (Digital Library of the University of Ljubljana) is an online bibliographic index that provides access to an extensive collection of resources, including over 20,000 paid electronic journals, over 170,000 paid electronic books, and a range of data from well-established publishers and information services, such as Elsevier ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Wiley, ACS, IEEE/IEL, IOS Press, JSTOR, Emerald, Sage, EBSCOhost, Taylor & Francis, Oxford University Press, Web of Science, and Scopus. Since DiKUL provides access to content disseminated by all major scientific publishers and information services, it was chosen as an appropriate entry point for the systematic search for original studies on ethnic distance.

and *group distance*.[7] Search results were not date ranged, as it was not expected to find studies older than the Bogardus distance scale itself. From 800 hits, we identified 106 potentially relevant papers and book chapters. All were then screened against the criteria of content relevance and scientific rigor. Finally, 32 articles from the DiKUL digital library were selected for detailed analysis.[8] Of these, two papers reported similar findings from the same survey (Bešić, 2019a, 2019b) and were subsequently treated as a single study, while one paper was excluded from the analysis as it had not been peer-reviewed. The literature review is, therefore, based on 30 studies carried out in 15 different countries, covering a period from the 1960s to the 2010s. In total, more than 40,000 people took part in surveys, observations, and experiments related to this literature review. The majority (16) of the studies were carried out on samples drawn from the (adult) population, while the other studies focused on university students, young adults, high school students, primary school pupils, and workers. 21 out of 30 studies employed Bogardus' (1925) social distance survey either directly or in one of its versions (see Table 1).

The rationale behind our research suggests that multiple factors influence ethnic distance, while these factors can be further broken down into separate variables. For instance, the factor of religion, according to one approach (Jeong, 2017), can arguably be related to the variables of religious denomination, attendance of religious services, religious tolerance, and religious particularism. Our effort, however, was not to create a comprehensive and exhaustive taxonomy of factors and variables but rather to identify those that stood out as empirically correlative and likely causative in several different studies. In the end, we have distinguished between four distinct factors of ethnic distance (sociodemography, exposure,[9] religion, and politics) that have emerged from the studies analyzed.

Different studies are variously explicit about the lines of causation. In any case, ethnic distance causation is multifactorial (with a likeliness of confounding and intervening variables); it also appears to be strongly contingent on the unique characteristics of the particular society in question. Our reasoning is that the identification of factors and variables, although their causation may not (yet) be fully understood and may be highly case-dependent, still provides a very valuable insight into the topic, especially regarding our project aim of developing a prototype of an innovative, practical model for reducing ethnic distance in post-conflict societies.

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[7] The concept of social distance is commonly understood in social science as the perceived degree of remoteness, closeness, or – in the words of Bogardus (1959, p. 7) – "sympathetic understanding" between persons and/or groups, be it in terms of ethnicity, religion, occupation, education, age, location, etc. Although ethnic distance is considered a subset of social distance, the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably in ethnic studies. This led us to also use social distance as a search term; we then excluded those results that did not relate to the concept of ethnicity. In the end, we reviewed the first 250 hits for the search terms *ethnic distance*, *social distance*, and *Bogardus scale*, and the first 50 listed hits for the search term *group distance*. The last of these terms proved to be insufficiently specific, which is why we only reviewed the first 50 hits (rather than 250 as with the other three search terms).

[8] Based on the title, abstract, and/or keywords, we selected only those articles that empirically address the concept of ethnic distance.

[9] While sociodemography, religion, and politics are rather self-explanatory categories, what we call exposure is perhaps a little more ambiguous. In the course of our research, this category has emerged as an umbrella term for different dimensions that are primarily concerned with the "experience of something," be it outgroup members, specific events, or content such as the media. In science, the term exposure is used in all these contexts.

Table 1

Identified Prevalent Factors and Variables of Significant Impact on Ethnic Distance

Source	Country of research	Sampling of surveyees/experimentees/observees	Bogardus scale	Supported factors	Supported variables
Banovac, 2009	Croatia	Population (6 towns)	Yes	S, E, R, P	1, 4, 6, 8, 10
Banovac & Boneta, 2006	Croatia	Population (3 regions)	Yes	E, R, P	6, 8, 10
Bešić, 2019a, 2019b	Montenegro	Population	Yes	S	1, 2, 3
Brinkerhoff & Jacob, 1994	Surinam	High schoolers	Yes	R	9
Butler & Tavits, 2017	Bosnia	Local politicians	No		
Fedor, 2021	Romania	Population (region)	Yes		
Hello et al., 2004	Netherlands	Young adults, parents	Yes	S	1, 2
Hello et al., 2006	Netherlands	Young adults	Yes	S	1, 2
Hindriks et al., 2014	Netherlands	Population (minorities)	Yes	E, R	5, 8
Jeong, 2017	South Korea	Population	No	S, R, P	1, 8, 9, 10
Kim et al., 2015	South Korea	Population (region)	Yes	S, P	1, 2, 3, 10
Koc & Anderson, 2018	USA	Crowd workers	Yes	R, P	8, 10
Kuzmin et al., 2015	Russia	Pupils, parents	Yes	S, E	4, 5
Lammers et al., 2012	Unspecified	Students	No		
Leino & Himmelroos, 2020	Finland	Population (1 city)	Yes	S	1, 2, 4
Malešević et al., 1997	Croatia	Students	Yes	E	7
Mihić & Mihić, 2003	Serbia	Pupils, parents	Yes	S	1, 4
Parrillo & Donoghue, 2005	USA	Students	Yes	S, E	1, 6
Parrillo & Donoghue, 2013	USA	Students	Yes	S, R	1, 4, 8, 9
Pal, 2004	Romania	Population	Yes	S, E	1, 2, 4, 5
Photiadis & Biggar, 1962	USA	Population (1 region)	Yes	S	2
Qian & Lichter, 2007	USA	Population	No	S, E	2, 5
Sekulić et al., 2006	Croatia	Population	No	S, E	1, 2, 4, 6, 7
Stojanovski et al., 2020	Macedonia	High schoolers, students	Yes	R	8, 9
Storm et al., 2017	UK	Population	No	S, R	1, 2, 4, 8, 9
Stupar et al., 2014	Netherlands	Population	No	S	2, 4
Tawa et al., 2015	USA	Students	No	S, E	3, 5
Vujević H. et al., 2010	Croatia	Population	Yes	S, E	1, 2, 4, 6
Winnick, 2019	USA	Students	Yes	E, R, P	5, 7, 8, 9, 10
Wiseman, 2015	Sudan, Iran	Population (2 villages)	No	E	5

LIST OF FACTORS: [S] sociodemography, [E] exposure, [R] religion, [P] politics

LIST OF VARIABLES: [1] gender, [2] education, [3] income, [4] age, [5] contact, [6] war, [7] news media, [8] religious commitment, [9] religious denomination, [10] political orientation

Note. Sources whose results did not support any of the listed factors/variables were used as a reference for discussion and to provide recommendations for future research.

The Factor of "Who We Are": Sociodemography

The sheer volume of analysis devoted to general population characteristics such as gender, age, and social status signifies that sociodemographic characteristics may be strong predictors of an individual's ethnic distance. Although most research also controls for sociodemographic differences to avoid bias in population conclusions drawn from sample-based studies, at least one of these characteristics (i.e., education) can be influenced in practice to reduce ethnic distance. Below, we also discuss three other significant variables identified in the reviewed studies: gender, income, and age.

Gender

Many studies reported relatively consistent finding that females are somewhat more tolerant than males (Banovac, 2009; Bešić, 2019a, 2019b; Hello et al., 2004; Hello et al., 2006; Jeong, 2017; Leino & Himmelroos, 2020; Mihić & Mihić, 2003; Pal, 2004; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2005, 2013; Sekulić et al., 2006; Storm et al., 2017; Vujević Hećimović et al., 2010). This is not typical only for the adult population but is significant already for children around the age of 10 (Mihić & Mihić, 2003). However, research findings are not entirely unanimous. For example, Kim et al. (2015), who studied South Korean attitudes towards North Korean refugees, found that South Korean men felt significantly closer to North Korean refugees than South Korean women.[10]

There seems to be no detailed research on the reasons for the predominantly lower ethnic distance among women. The answer may lie in psychological differences between the genders. While these differences are reported to be small or even nonexistent in most domains, there are some exceptions of moderate magnitude (see Hyde, 2014). For example, women are generally more agreeable than men (i.e., on average, more nurturing, tender-minded, and altruistic) and also more interested in people (in contrast to men, who are more interested in things) (Hyde, 2014). Such psychological differences might be relevant to the mechanisms driving gender dissimilarities in ethnic distance and could be the subject of further research. In any case, it is essential to note that research suggests that gender differences are also highly context-dependent.

Education

Research has repeatedly shown that individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to avoid social interactions with ethnic outgroups than those with lower levels of education (Bešić, 2019a, 2019b; Hello et al., 2004; Hello et al., 2006; Leino & Himmelroos, 2020; Photiadis & Biggar, 1962; Qian & Lichter, 2007; Sekulić et al., 2006; Storm et al., 2017; Stupar et al., 2014; Vujević Hećimović et al., 2010). As summarized by Hello et al. (2004), this effect has been interpreted as the "liberalizing effect of education: the educational system has been considered to be the most important socializing agent by which to transmit liberal values," while "educational effect remains strong even when controlling for numerous other individual characteristics, such as social class, age, and so on" (p. 253). As Parrillo and Donoghue (2013) have argued, it is tertiary education in particular that has a positive effect due to a "dynamic combination of campus life social interaction and interactive classroom learning," which leads to a "liberalization of views about the 'other'" (pp. 611–612). This view is supported by the results of several other researchers, including Storm et al. (2017), who, researching the society in the United Kingdom, noted a significant impact of having a university degree, and Bešić (2019a), who came to a similar conclusion based on the survey conducted in Montenegro. Liberalization of views through education may be particularly important in war-torn societies. In Croatia, for example, educational attainment after the War of Independence (1991–1995) had been highly correlated with decreased intolerance after the war (Sekulić et al., 2006).

In their follow-up research, Hello et al. (2006) reported that about three-fifths of the liberalizing effect of education can be explained by the impact of perceived threat. This aligns with the racial threat theory (see Blalock, 1967), which suggests that individuals facing greater economic constraints often experience heightened pressure due to increased labor competition

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[10] Yet this result may be highly context-dependent – South Koreans predominantly regard North Koreans as of the same ethnicity, differing only in sociocultural background (Kim et al., 2015). Therefore, in this case, the *ethnic* component of the social distance may not be as pronounced as the *cultural* one.

with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. In this sense, higher levels of education facilitate access to resources, thereby reducing the sense of threat from ethnic outgroups.

In addition to surveys of (self-reported) ethnic distance, liberalizing effects of education are also supported by analyses of the census data. Qian and Lichter (2007) examined trends in racial and ethnic intermarriage in the United States of America using data from the 5-percent public use microdata sample. They found a robust educational gradient in intermarriage between native- and foreign-born co-ethnics among Hispanics and Asian Americans, suggesting that higher education leads to more frequent contact with the majority group, which in turn opens opportunities to cross group boundaries through marriage. On the other hand, the data showed no such phenomena among African Americans. As the authors had theorized (Qian & Lichter, 2007), "even among well-educated African Americans, opportunities for contact with whites may be constrained by the schools they attend and the fields of study they choose or are steered toward" (p. 90).

Some research results suggest that the influence of education may be contingent upon the group's position within the ethnic hierarchy. As elucidated by Stupar et al. (2014, p. 33), individuals in minority groups (such as immigrants, who are expected to be positioned lower in the hierarchy) are more likely to benefit from multiculturalism, regardless of their educational background. Conversely, this is not true for individuals in the majority group (who are expected to be higher in the social hierarchy), as those with lower levels of education may face more competition from immigrant groups.

Findings that directly contradict the racial threat theory are fairly rare. For example, Pal (2004), who studied social distance between Romanians and Hungarians in Romania, found a positive correlation between education and the degree of social distance but did not offer any explanation for this. Similarly, Kim et al. (2015) reported that better-educated South Koreans felt more distant from North Korean refugees (although this particular finding may be highly context-dependent, as already pointed out in the footnote above). Some other authors (Banovac & Boneta, 2006; Jeong, 2017) also found in their research that education level is not significantly correlated to ethnic distance.

Income

Some research suggests that income may significantly predict ethnic distance, as individuals with higher earnings tend to be more tolerant of ethnic outgroups than those with lower income (Bešić, 2019a, 2019b; Kim et al., 2015). Yet, as Bešić (2019b) theorized based on his empirical data from Montenegro, there is no significant difference between those with medium and high income, implying that income may only be of importance when it is exceptionally low. Once income reaches a certain "reasonable level," further increases may not substantially affect the level of ethnic distance. If we consider money (income) as an instrument for resource competition, we might expect that the setting of non-resource competition would have a positive effect on ethnic distance. This is indeed the case, as demonstrated by the virtual world experiment conducted in Second Life by Tawa et al. (2015). On the contrary, authors have noted that resource competition tends to increase social distance over time.

Although we can presume that income simply acts as an intervening variable linking the effect of education to ethnic distance (because the better educated tend to have higher income), research suggests that the causality may not be so straightforward. As Kim et al. (2015) empirically demonstrated, there are situations in which higher education is positively correlated with ethnic distance, while income is negatively correlated. The explanation may lie in psychology – as research has shown (Leckelt et al., 2018), the personality of wealthier individuals differs from that of the general population (i.e., high-net-worth individuals are on

average less prosocial and have a below-average communal orientation). The impact of these characteristics on ethnic distance remains to be examined in future analyses.

Age

At first glance, it appears that there are contradictory findings regarding the influence of age on ethnic distance. However, two dominant trends become apparent if we separate the studies into those dealing with the adult population and those dealing with children. On the one hand, surveys of children (Kuzmin et al., 2015; Mihić & Mihić, 2003) have demonstrated a significantly higher ethnic distance of schoolchildren compared to their parents. This may be explained by the fact that children lack experience with other cultures and nationalities (Kuzmin et al., 2015) or simply by the fact that children are not yet fully cognitively developed (Mihić & Mihić, 2003).

On the other hand, there is evidence that ethnic distance among adults tends to increase somewhat with age (Banovac, 2009; Leino & Himmelroos, 2020; Pal, 2004; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2013; Sekulić et al., 2006; Storm et al., 2017; Stupar et al., 2014; Vujević Hećimović et al., 2010). The question remains whether young adults are more accepting because they are more open to diversity earlier in their life cycle or whether generational differences matter. Leino and Himmelroos (2020) offer a plausible explanation for their findings from the Finnish survey; while older residents may, in principle, view outgroups (such as immigrants) positively, the practical implications of increased ethnic diversity may still be something unfamiliar to them and challenging to deal with. Himmelroos's findings corroborate with differences in personality traits between adults of different ages, as there is evidence that older people are on average more agreeable but less extroverted and open (see Donnellan & Lucas, 2008).

The Factor of "How We Live": Exposure

It is reasonable to assert that an individual's exposure to a variety of experiences has a significant impact on his or her perception of the social environment and, thus, on attitudes toward other ethnic groups. Research has repeatedly confirmed that contact (especially positive interaction) with other ethnic groups has a significant influence on reducing ethnic distance. However, studies are warning that interventions for reducing social distance and overcoming social stereotypes drawing on the intergroup contact theory should be carefully implemented to avoid unwanted effects. In addition, some studies suggest that the mass media significantly influence ethnic attitudes, while involvement in war or war-like situations (extremely negative interaction) leaves ethnic wounds that are detected by surveys even many years after the end of hostilities. We discuss all these variables under the umbrella term of exposure.

Interethnic Contact

Having a friend or acquaintance from another ethnic group is well known to be a predictor of lower ethnic distance, which is consistent with the intergroup contact theory (see Allport, 1954). In recent studies, this theoretical insight concurs with Winnick's study (2019), which emphasized that having a Muslim acquaintance significantly reduces the likelihood of Islamophobia, and Hindriks et al. (2014), who reported that increased contact with minority outgroups (Muslim or Surinamese/Antillean) is associated with lower social distance from the Dutch majority towards these groups. In the latter case, however, increased minority contact with the Dutch majority was not associated with any reduction in ethnic distance. In fact, the effect of interethnic contact can be asymmetrical in either direction. This is supported by Pal (2004), who found that interethnic contact tended to reduce the distance of the Hungarian

minority towards the Romanian majority (and not *vice versa*, as in the aforementioned Dutch case).

Fostering intergroup contact can be a powerful tool for practical interventions.[11] As Tawa et al. (2015) reported from their virtual world experiment in which they simulated an environment of resource competition, social distances between experimentees decreased significantly after just 15 minutes, suggesting that even "brief encounters can have positive effects on race relations, as long as participants are not competing for resources" (p. 774). Moreover, the possibility of a virtual world effect on ethnic distance challenges the universality of the notion that social distance equals physical distance – a conception that has characterized most communities throughout history (see Wiseman, 2015). Nevertheless, physical distance undoubtedly retains some significance, as supported by Qian and Lichter (2007), who theorize that living in highly segregated and geographically isolated areas limits opportunities for interracial marriage and thus closes off some opportunities to cross group boundaries.

A decrease in ethnic distance can also occur as a side effect, as confirmed by a study conducted in Russia. According to Kuzmin et al. (2015), ethnic distance can be significantly influenced by a person's migration experience. In the studied region of the Sverdlovsk oblast, with Yekaterinburg at its center, where almost half of the adult population and about a quarter of schoolchildren had experienced some form of migration in their lives, these experiences had a positive effect. The study suggests that even migration within the region, for example, from a rural area to an urban center, increases cultural awareness and significantly shapes perceptions of others.

War and War-like Events

As noted by Bogardus (1967, as cited in Parrillo & Donoghue, 2005), social catastrophes have a profound effect on social distance. In this line, Parrillo and Donoghue (2005) reported findings that were significantly tempered by the catastrophic events of the September 11 attacks on the United States of America. In their study, respondents gave much higher social distance scores to Arabs and Muslims than would have been expected if the attacks had not occurred. The authors call this the "unity syndrome" – an increase in cohesion against an enemy that has attacked one's country.

One of the cases where the impact of war on ethnic distance has been particularly well studied is Croatia. Banovac and Boneta (2006), who examined ethnic distance in three Croatian regions, found that distance was significantly higher in the Lika region—the region that was severely affected during the Croatian War of Independence in the 1990s. This rather unsurprising result was further confirmed in a separate study by Banovac (2009), who compared ethnic distance in three areas where the conflict escalated to the level of community disintegration (Gospić, Plaški and Pakrac municipalities) with three areas where radical conflict was avoided (Rovinj, Vrbovsko and Daruvar municipalities). Banovac (2009, p. 190) emphasized huge differences "in all categories of relations between the 'conflict areas' and the 'peace enclaves' when it comes to accepting different ethnic groups. The answers distribution rather clearly shows that the ethnic boundaries are more clearly and 'sharply' drawn in the conflict areas than in the peace areas." That the greater ethnic distance in regions more exposed to war violence is no coincidence is confirmed by the findings of Sekulić et al. (2006) and Vujević Hećimović et al. (2010). Indeed, the longitudinal data (results of seven surveys from the 1984–2008 period) clearly correlates war violence with the increase in ethnic distance,

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[11] Studies are warning that doing interventions for reducing social distance and overcoming social stereotypes in line with the intergroup contact theory should be planned and done with caution, as there are examples when contact leads to the increase of distance and severing of ties with the other social group (see, e.g., Brown & Hewstone, 2005).

which is thus assessed as a driving force of intolerance. On the positive side, the effects tend to slowly fade out after the end of hostilities. Although it would be an exaggeration to say that time heals all wounds, it certainly takes time – and a favorable constellation of many other structural factors – for interethnic relations to normalize once the security situation is stabilized.

News Media

Surveying students at the regional North American campus, Winnick (2019, p. 11) noted that the viewers of Fox News had a significantly more negative attitude towards Muslims than the followers of other news channels (ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, and MSNBC). This finding is unsurprising, as Fox News is known to be a conservative channel broadcasting a program that blends elements of populism and tabloid journalism. Winnick (2019) further suggests that even no exposure (never watching the news) "appears to shield respondents from negative media-influenced views" (p. 11).

A somewhat similar finding on the importance of conservative media content was reported by Malešević and Uzelac (1997), who surveyed students at the University of Zagreb during the Croatian War of Independence. As they noted, most respondents had no direct experience of the war, so exposure to the media likely had a significant influence. Given that most of the media outlets were government-controlled, it was argued that the increase in ethnic distance towards Serbs, Montenegrins, and Bosnian Muslims was primarily due to the manipulation of content by the power elites. Using a longitudinal approach to their study, the increase in ethnic distance turned out to be highly correlated with the derogatory portrayal of outgroups in the press, proving their hypothesis. Their view was further supported by Sekulić et al. (2006), who argued that, apart from the war itself, it was, in fact, the elite's manipulation of the public image of the events that led to an increase in intolerance in the general population.

The Factor of "Who We Believe In": Religion

Several studies have shown that religion has a strong influence on ethnic tolerance. This is not surprising, as religious beliefs and practices play an essential role in shaping moral attitudes. Moreover, religious belief is historically closely linked to the concept of ethnicity – religion and group identity were intertwined in traditional societies, and this link remains strong even today. As Voas (2015) explains, it has generally become conventional to examine three facets of religious engagement: belief, affiliation, and practice. In the following, we look at the first two of these categories, as they are often reported to be significant concerning ethnic distance.

Religious Commitment

Most researchers report that higher levels of religious commitment correlate with increased levels of ethnic distance (Banovac & Boneta, 2006; Banovac, 2009; Hindriks et al., 2014; Koc & Anderson, 2018; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2013; Stojanovski & Poposka, 2020; Storm et al., 2017; Winnick, 2019). The reasons for this are debatable, ranging from prejudice to ingroup embeddedness to the promotion of conservative values. One of the most common explanations is the one summarized by Photiadis and Biggar (1962), who believed that religion creates ethnic distance through the so-called orthodoxy (the degree to which someone believes in religious ideas). Although this hypothesis was not directly supported by their data, at least one other researcher found a more robust correlation in this regard. According to Banovac's (2009) research, it is clear that convinced worshippers (the most committed individuals) are much less open in ethnic terms than atheists on the other hand. The in-betweeners (those who

describe themselves as irreligious, indifferent, skeptical, or religious) did not show significant deviation from the measured average of ethnic distance.

However, the positive correlation between religious commitment and ethnic distance is not universal. Jeong (2017), for example, found that religious South Koreans have much more positive attitudes towards Muslims (who, in the case of South Korea, are mostly migrant workers from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, and other foreign countries) than atheists.

Nonetheless, a study from Croatia shows that caution is needed when interpreting the causality of religiosity. According to the survey results of Sekulić et al. (2006), nationalists are typically less ethnically tolerant while also being more religious. The authors postulate that people do not become more nationalistic because they become more religious. Instead, during the war year in Croatia, rising nationalist sentiments made religious practices and beliefs more attractive. At the same time, as they became more religious, their levels of intolerance also increased, establishing a statistical link between religiosity and intolerance.

Religious Denomination

Although many studies have shown that religious denomination significantly impacts ethnic distance, results are conflicting as to the exact effect of each religion in particular. For instance, some studies rank the Catholics among those with the highest ethnic distance (Parrillo & Donoghue 2013; Winnick, 2019), while others qualify them as the tolerant ones (Jeong, 2017; Storm et al. 2017). Similarly, we could continue to list statistically significant but contradictory results for other major religions or their branches (see Jeong, 2017), but there appears to be no particular pattern.

Brinkerhoff and Jacob (1994) provide a useful starting point for consideration from the Surinam survey. According to the authors, it appears that the ethnic distance of those within one's ethnic group but of a different religion differs from the distance of a different ethnic group and religion. This is sometimes referred to as religious ambivalence (see Smrke, 2019). Namely, on the one hand, religions can unite people across social boundaries; on the other hand, they can be radically exclusive, not only of non-believers but even of those who follow a different school, practice, or order within their particular branch. However, as Smrke (2019) notes, exclusivity cannot be generalized. Religions that want to grow must be at least somewhat open to bridging. In this light, it is reasonable to argue that religions with greater potential for bridging express less distance from outgroups, while religions that primarily promote inward integration express greater intolerance.

The influence of religious bridging and bonding phenomena on ethnic distance remains open to research, bearing in mind that ethnic and religious identity are often intertwined. The latter was proven, for example, in what is now officially North Macedonia, where religious identity is much more important for Albanian (predominantly Muslim) respondents than for Macedonians (who are predominantly Christian) (Stojanovski & Poposka, 2020).

The Factor of "What and How We Support": Politics

In the last category, we consider only one variable – political orientation. This does not mean that this is the only political aspect that significantly contributes to an individual's ethnic distance, yet it does indicate what recent research has focused on. In this vein, future research could pay more attention to additional variables, such as civic engagement and political participation, which may also prove to be relevant.

Political Orientation

Although the categorization of the political spectrum into left, center, and right is sometimes considered obsolete, this conventional distinction is most often used in surveys that examine political orientation. Since the right-wing, conservative political option is associated with traditionalist values, ethnocentrism, and more xenophobic attitudes (Banovac, 2009), it is expected that right-wing leaning individuals are, on average, more ethnically distant than supporters of the center and the left. Recent research supports this hypothesis, as shown by the results of Banovac (2009), Banovac and Boneta (2006), Kim (2015), Jeong (2017), Koc and Anderson (2018), and Winnick (2019).

According to Banovac and Boneta (2006), a right-wing political orientation is characterized by a focus on traditional values, a heightened sense of ethnocentrism, a stronger attachment to the ingroup, and a greater reluctance to interact with people from a foreign background. Conversely, left-leaning individuals tend to be more open to forming friendships with members of other ethnic groups. The fact that the right-leaning individuals do indeed have a greater distance to the others was re-confirmed in the Croatian case by Banovac (2009). However, the author noted a peculiarity, namely that at the extreme left and right of the spectrum there is a tendency at both poles towards increasing the distance to outgroups.

Winnick (2019), who included an explicit question on party affiliation in his survey in the United States of America, found that Democrats and Independents tended to have significantly more favorable views of Muslims than Republicans. Those with no party affiliation differed only slightly from Republicans. However, as the study by Koc and Anderson (2018) shows, asking about party affiliation or political orientation may not always be elucidatory. As the authors reported, Americans' ethnic distance toward Syrian refugees was not correlated with self-reported political orientation. On the other hand, testing on a 13-item version of right-wing authoritarianism proved that this unidimensional personality trait could drive people's tendency to avoid interaction with outgroups (i.e., refugees), thus raising the question of how to measure political conservatism (self-reported orientation vs. personality testing).

Discussion

Before discussing the results of our research, we will offer some general observations about the methodology of the 30 studies reviewed. First, there appears to be a significant lack of longitudinal studies, which makes it difficult to draw robust conclusions, particularly concerning causality. Second, the lack of cross-national comparative analyses and the general tendency towards Western-centered research increases the likelihood of bias in terms of external validity. In addition, the vast majority of original research is based on surveys of self-reported ethnic distance, so there may often be some degree of discrepancy between reported and true values of the same measure. As a large body of research is based on Bogardus' survey instrument, many studies share the drawbacks inherent in all Guttman scales, such as one-dimensionality, questionable equidistance of items, and oversimplification of a complex issue into a single numerical score.[12] On the other hand, it is encouraging that high-quality research has been carried out for several decades, adding to the body of research both in terms of the quantity and the (geographical) areas covered. The use of similar instruments (the frequent use of the Bogardus social distance scale, either directly or in one of its variants) makes the studies comparable; in this respect, it would be worth exploring whether future systematic reviews

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[12] Researchers have proposed alternative frameworks that aim to overcome the limitations of typical Bogardus social distance surveys. For recent examples that combine Bogardus with Likert scales, see Mather et al. (2017) and Koc and Anderson (2018).

could be based on statistical analysis. To that end, future reviews could also build on some additional search terms commonly used in the field, such as "ethnic attitude."[13]

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, our research yielded several insightful results for a comprehensive understanding of the factors of ethnic distance. Moreover, we were able to identify some plausible (mainly psychological) underlying mechanisms behind each of the identified factors, which may also be worth future exploration. The main finding of our study suggests that various variables of ethnic distance can be categorized into four distinct factors: sociodemography, exposure, religion, and politics. This does not mean that these are the only important factors in explaining ethnic distance.[14] Rather, our study suggests that at least these should be taken into account in analyses and before any practical intervention is attempted to increase interethnic tolerance. It is also important to note that none of the factors and their correlating variables were found to be universal and generally applicable, as the cause of ethnic distance is multifactorial and context-dependent.

Beginning with sociodemographics – gender, education, income, and age proved to be strong and fairly frequent predictors of ethnic distance. Many studies report that women have lower ethnic distance towards members of ethnic outgroups. The same goes for the level of formal education, which also appears to be strongly correlated with ethnic distance: the higher the education, the higher the level of social interaction with ethnic outgroups. The so-called liberalizing effect of education, as this transmittance of liberal values is labeled in scholarship, makes people less antagonistic towards ethnic outgroups. With some reservation, the same could be said for income, in which people with higher income are likely to show lower ethnic distance, as they are less afraid that "the others" will outcompete them in the labor market. Another sociodemographic factor common across studies is age, with older adults tending to be more ethnically distant than younger cohorts. On the other hand, there is evidence that ethnic distance is high in childhood and tends to decrease towards a low point in early adulthood.

The quality of contact with the outgroup – a positive interaction – is another important predictor of lower ethnic distance. One such example is friendship; meeting someone from another ethnic group who becomes a friend or, at least, acquaintance is likely to increase tolerance. This finding is often used by peacebuilding or reconciliation practitioners who devise programs for reducing ethnic distance and develop "exposure activities," where it is expected that the quality of contact and the general atmosphere would be good. Unsurprisingly, in post-conflict societies, most activities in this regard are targeting young people, who tend to be less burdened by the legacy of armed violence. On the other hand, it is particularly the extreme negative interaction (war or war-like armed violence) that is a very strong driving force towards intolerance. The influence of catastrophic events on ethnic distance can be further reinforced by exposure to conservative media (which also has an effect on its own). In our research, we have combined dimensions of interethnic contact, exposure to war, and exposure to media under the umbrella factor of exposure.

Concerning religion, we found that commitment and denomination matter. Studies suggest that the higher the level of religious commitment, the higher the level of ethnic distance. This is rather understandable, as believers tend to be more inward-looking than the more secular population. On the other hand, religious denomination has also proved to be statistically significant in several studies, but we have not been able to identify any specific (global) pattern.

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[13] Ethnic attitude is a concept closely related to ethnic distance. Whereas "ethnic distance" refers primarily to a perceived degree of remoteness or closeness in terms of someone's beliefs, "ethnic attitude" combines a cognitive component with a behavioral aspect in terms of favorable or unfavorable responses to people from another ethnic group (see, e.g., Aboud & Skerry, 1984; Jackman, 1977).
[14] The classification presented does not include all possible factors and variables but only those that were common to at least several of the studies examined. Examples of other variables that were only found to be significant in some studies include physical appearance, identity, and religious practice.

Our final finding relates to the political factor – supporters or sympathizers of right-wing parties are less inclined towards ethnic outgroups than their left-wing counterparts.

One might wonder how the taxonomy of factors of ethnic distance presented above corroborates with the established theories in the field (such as racial threat theory, intergroup contact theory, reactance theory, social interdependence theory, and implicit prejudice theory, to name a few) (see Sassenberg & Vliek, 2019). The answer to this question is not straightforward. As suggested above, ethnic distance is context-dependent, meaning that the applicability of each theory may vary depending on specific conditions, circumstances, and settings. While theories aim to provide robust, empirically supported frameworks for understanding the world, they never account for all possible variations in context. In this regard, several contextual variables may prove relevant in the study of a particular real-world case, either increasing or decreasing the explanatory power of a particular ethnic distance factor and, consequently, the relevance of related concepts and theories. Potential contextual variables include cultural characteristics (such as norms, values, practices, and traditions), level of urbanization (urban vs. rural setting), political setting (such as political structures and policies), population composition (demographic make-up of a given area, including the relative size and distribution of ethnic groups) and economy (organization of money, industry, and trade), to name but a few. Details of how the combination of contextual and ethnic distance variables might challenge existing theories remain to be explored.

In terms of interventions aimed at reducing ethnic distance, prudence is important, especially when dealing with war-torn societies (Kočan & Zupančič, 2024; Strayhorn, 2022, 2023). While there are several viable approaches, the primary focus of any intervention should be to "deethnicize" or "denationalize" the pain, trauma, and sorrow of war (Kuhar et al., 2023). There are not many examples in history where one ethnic group was the sole victim of violence, and the members of the other group were the sole perpetrators. Interventions should, therefore, include educational and awareness-raising initiatives that go beyond the reductionist and essentialist portrayal of the other ethnic group as a fixed, monolithic bloc responsible for all the misery that has befallen "our" ethnic group (Zupančič et al., 2021). In this regard, the concept of the individuality of war crimes could be widely promoted; for example, initiatives that counter the belief that a specific war crime was committed by the nation as a whole could help to alleviate the sense of responsibility that the entire ethnic group wanted to eradicate members of the "other" group. An excellent example of this kind is the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo, which does not tell the glorious story of one nation and its struggles during the war (as is often the case with national museums), but rather focuses on the wartime suffering of innocent children from all ethnic groups. According to the official statement, the War Childhood Museum provides people from Bosnia and Herzegovina "a rare opportunity to confront the traumas of their recent past without reinforcing ethnic boundaries" (War Childhood Museum, n.d.). The museum strives "to confront the traumas" of the locals of "all ages" while also attempting to "educate a broad audience" and to "advance mutual understanding at the collective level" (War Childhood Museum, n.d.). It can, therefore, be seen as an example of an institution that practically addresses some of the variables identified and discussed in this paper (i.e., exposure to war, age, education, and interethnic contact).

Conclusion

The study of ethnic distance remains essential, as it not only provides insights into social dynamics but also points to potential sources of conflict. Beyond its inherent academic interest, a comprehensive understanding of ethnic distance is of great importance to policymakers, who can use research findings to design effective policies aimed at reducing prejudice, promoting diversity, ensuring equal opportunities, and achieving fruitful coexistence between different

ethnic groups. In this way, original research could shed further light on the troubling ethnic hotspots, while additional systematic reviews would provide a comprehensive assessment of existing research as well as a concise scientific basis for the development of policies and initiatives to address the challenges of ethnic diversity.

The overarching conclusion of our study is that different variables of ethnic distance can be grouped into four distinct factors: sociodemography, exposure, religion, and politics. Our research suggests that at least these factors should be taken into account in analyses and before any practical intervention is attempted to increase interethnic tolerance. However, the complexity of each society contributes to its unique social context. We should, therefore, always be cautious in translating theoretical findings into practical interventions, as each conflict is different, as are the people within a society.

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