

Research Design: A Review of Literature and Methodological Choices in the Study of the
Rohingya Refugee Crisis

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SISU-206

13 December 2017

Research Question

My research question asks, “How have widespread perceptions of the ethnic violence and refugee crisis in Myanmar been influenced by news coverage, academic research, and official governmental responses to these events, and what effect has this discourse had on the status of the situation?” To approach this research question, I plan to use the Interpretivist research design for my project, with a specific focus on discourse analysis. My initial research question dealt more with quantitative statistics, so in the process of deciding my research design, I ended up modifying my question to account for a greater emphasis on discourse. As a result, I am more concerned with media coverage and the international conversation around the issue, rather than looking directly at the causes and effects of the problem itself.

Literature Review

The Rohingya in Myanmar/Burma are a minority Muslim group currently living under the hostile rule of a primarily Buddhist government. This is significant because a recent increase in religious and ethnic violence towards this group has produced a large number of internally displaced persons and refugees fleeing to surrounding countries like Bangladesh (Green 5), creating one of the worst humanitarian crises of the decade in a region that is already facing great instability. Since August 2017 alone, Bangladesh has seen the arrival of 538,000 Rohingya refugees as a result of the latest rounds of violence, and there are now more Rohingya in Bangladesh than there are left in Myanmar (Asrar 3).

There are several different ways of thinking about the Rohingya crisis, each focusing on a different key factor in the situation. This section will serve as a review of the existing literature

on these perspectives and the key issues they address, including Myanmar's historical post-colonial transition and subsequent shifting of political system, the cross-cultural aspects of the country's ethnic and geographic diversity, and the government's response in failing to protect its citizens and actively participating in state-sponsored acts of ethnic cleansing.¹

Historical Perspectives and the Influence of Post-Colonial Transition

In order to understand the reasons behind the Rohingya crisis, one must first understand the historical developments that led the country to its current situation. To begin, many of the issues today can be traced to the effects of British colonialism, instituted after the 1826-28 Anglo-Burmese War against the native Burmans in the region (Green 7). During this time, the colony experienced great change in terms of both ethnic makeup and societal infrastructure. Trade and increased interconnectedness of the region in the 19th and 20th centuries caused the original influx of British, Indians, and Muslims from different parts of Asia (Kosem 213), with the ancestors of today's Rohingya then settling in modern-day Rakhine State. This historical background is important to the Rohingyas' legitimacy as citizens, since they have inhabited the country for centuries and established towns, an economy, and a way of life there. Despite this mass-migration, the Burmans remained the majority ethnic group and continue to hold this position even today.

Indeed, much of today's ethnic conflict in Myanmar originated with the Burman struggle for independence. It first began as an ethno-nationalist movement of the Burmans who wanted to

¹ Ethnic cleansing: "a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas" ("Ethnic Cleansing 1").

have their own state (Fredholm 28). During the 1930s, they held strikes and violent uprisings against both the colonial British and the immigrant Indians (Fredholm 29). Even from the beginning, this movement was founded on the resentment of others. Then in 1948, they gained independence (Green 7) and formed an early system of governance while also grappling with a desire for a racially pure society of just Burmans (Fredholm 28). A military coup in 1962 then served as the catalyst for discrimination against minority ethnic groups (Green 7), especially through the military and its explicit attacks on Rohingya villages. The military junta continued the rollback of Rohingya civil rights into the next several decades.

By the 1970s, the repression had escalated to the point where state-sponsored terror attacks on the Rohingya in 1978 swept over 200,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh (Kosem 212). Then, the 1982 Citizenship Law refused to name the Rohingya as one of the country's officially recognized ethnic groups and denied their claims of legitimacy (Green 7), which prompted further human rights violations against them. In 1989, the country was renamed Myanmar, a Burman term that reflected the power of the Burman majority over the other ethnic groups (Green 7). Since then, the Burman control of the government has only increased. In 1990-91, the government pushed another 250,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh (Kosem 212). Evidently, the history that was so rooted in ethnic concerns has served as a foundation in paving the way for the current repression of minority groups.

Cross-Cultural Effect of Ethnic and Geographical Diversity

Looking more specifically at Myanmar's ethnic makeup, one can see that it is a highly diverse country. In 1982, the state officially recognized 135 ethnic groups (Asrar), although not

counting the Rohingya. The largest ethnic majority group today, the Burmans, only comprises 60% of the population (Fredholm 10). As a result, cross-cultural relations are very delicate and play a large role in the politics of the region. Scholars have identified four theoretical approaches to ethnic politics that can be used to gain a better understanding of the conflict.

The first of these theoretical approaches is Primordialism, which “perceives ethnic identities as fixed and attributes ethnic conflicts to age-old animosities between groups” (Thawngmung 7). In other words, this approach operates under the assumption of clearly-defined ethnic groups with deeply entrenched cultural differences that remain static over time and continue to promote fighting. Other scholars refute this theory, arguing that in the case of Myanmar, the dozens of ethnic groups have many cultural overlaps and underlying similarities, which makes it hard to clearly distinguish between them as a result (Fredholm 11). For example, the Muslim Arakanese (i.e. the Rohingya) and their cousins the Buddhist Arakanese (called the Rakhine) live in the same state, originate from the same ethnic background, and really only differ in religion (Fredholm 12-13). This then would seem to imply that they could be considered an integrated group, yet they are very different and completely separate factions who actively oppose one another and participate in religious conflict (Green 7), so it would be a critical mistake to assume homogeneity and lump them all into one group. This kind of overlap therefore makes it difficult to study these groups in terms of ethnic politics, since blurry, inconsistent, or ill-defined distinctions means that Primordial analysis cannot accurately or comprehensively identify all of the key groups involved and the nuanced roles that they play in the conflict.

Another framework that can be applied is structural analysis, which is commonly utilized in social science fields like peace studies in order to identify the systemic problems that lead to specific events. To formally define it, structural analysis is a theoretical approach that “demonstrates how both the domestic and the international environment and the institutional rules or procedures, whether formal or informal, [...] influence political behavior and outcomes” (Thawngmung 8). It therefore looks at the structure of government and society in deciding the underlying causes of crises. One factor that contributes to the validity of this approach in Myanmar is the fact that the government purposely isolates its ethnic groups by state (Green 7), with the Rohingya mostly being confined to the Rakhine state, which is located along the northwest border with Bangladesh (Kosem 211). According to the theory, government-imposed geographic isolation only exacerbates the resentment and prejudicial tensions between the ethnic groups while also hurting any chance of developing better intercultural relations among them.

A third approach called Rational Choice Theory focuses on the “assumption that individuals are rational, goal-oriented, self-interested actors who are primarily motivated to maximize their personal gains” (Thawngmung 10). Similar to the Realist school of thought in International Relations, the theory basically views ethnic politics as a series of calculated choices made by individuals, as opposed to being inherent differences between groups. This view is supported by some academics, one of which argues, “for most inhabitants of Burma, then, the choice of ethnicity, or rather the choice of expressing or suppressing one’s ethnicity, is more an expression of the current political climate than an essential characteristic of the individual” (Fredholm 13). This author sees ethnic identity as a rational choice made through consideration of what the best option would be for the specific individual, given the state of affairs at the time.

Then, it logically follows that if ethnic identity is a choice, it cannot be a static collective fixture, as the Primordialist approach would argue.

Finally, the last approach sees ethnic politics as being defined by and dependent upon socially constructed ethnic identities, where “meanings and attributes attached to [identities] have been variously assigned in different cultures and are constantly reinterpreted based on the reconfiguration of power” (Thawngmung 12). Relating to this, one scholar notes that the state boundaries within Myanmar designate certain areas for each of the ethnic groups, which is seen as “highly artificial and strongly challenged by all ethnic minorities” (Fredholm 13) in the country. This seems to suggest that these state divisions decided by those in power may contribute to the perpetuation of the socially constructed identities in Myanmar as seen through the lens of this approach.

All of these approaches provide parallel frameworks for looking at different elements of the same types of cross-cultural conflicts and situations in the study of ethnic politics. Each approach has varying scholarly support and criticisms, so it is important to understand the academic context of their arguments when deciding which to use in analyzing specific situations and events.

State Action and Governmental Failure

I contend that the Rohingya crisis is not only a refugee/migratory issue, but also a human rights issue. Looking at the refugee crisis through the lens of structural analysis reveals that one of the main challenges faced by the Rohingya are the legal restrictions placed upon them by their own government. The main problem is the government’s treatment of the Rohingya as illegal immigrants under the argument that they are not legitimate Burmese but instead Bangladeshi,

though the group has existed within the bounds of Myanmar for centuries (Kosem 212). This violation of the Rohingyas' human rights include exclusion from citizenship, state-issued documentation, and censuses (Green 7), as well as "restrictions on freedom of movement, being banned from owning land, control of marriages, being subjected to various forms of extortion and arbitrary taxation, land confiscation, forced eviction, and house destruction" (Kosem 212).

Unsurprisingly, the government that continues to attack, kill, and displace its own people has shown little response to internal and international pressure. This is largely because the country has set precedent with this kind of violence in the past against other marginalized ethnic groups, such as the Karen (Thawngmung 42).

However, the Rohingya crisis is currently taking place on an exponentially larger scale than ever before. Al Jazeera has published the following statistics on the dispersion of ethnic Rohingya in the region: 350,000 have ended up in Pakistan, 200,000 in Saudi Arabia, 150,000 in Malaysia, 40,000 in India, 10,000 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), 5,000 in Thailand, and 1,000 in Indonesia, in addition to the over 1 million in Bangladesh and the 120,000 IDPs within Rakhine State itself (Goldman). By comparison, there are only a total of 500,000-700,000 left within Myanmar (Goldman). These trends of violence, diaspora, and the systematic disregard for human life unfortunately seem to be following many of the same patterns as previous waves of ethnic violence.

As the Myanmar people agitate for change in these kinds of policies, the government has further cracked down and instituted counterinsurgency tactics to quell the unrest, using the excuse of putting down what they see as rebellion as justification for violence and the destruction

of Rohingya villages (Thawngmung 74). These “clearance operations” have burned down 80 villages in Rakhine and entirely or partially cleared the inhabitants of nearly 200 others, just from September to October of 2017 (Asrar).

Lack of International Attention

With that context in mind, the new ramping up of violence against the Rohingya is seen as being just par for the course in Myanmar. In terms of leadership, the country’s leader, 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, has been idle and refuses to take action to stop the military’s abuses (Goldman). Near the end of 2017, she cancelled public appearances to avoid facing questions from the press and others who sought to pressure her on the issue (Sun). Some have argued that her Nobel Peace Prize, given for her past promotion of democracy, should be revoked due to her silence on this issue. However, this is not likely to happen, and it likely would not compel her to act either way (Goldman).

In terms of outside actors, very few have spoken out about the plight of the Rohingya. The UN has been put in a difficult situation because spreading information about the situation or being too direct would anger the Burman/Buddhist-majority government that they must rely on to get resources and support to the Rohingya (Fisher). This has had startling side effects: “For UN staff it meant that publicly talking about the Rohingya became almost taboo. Many UN press releases about Rakhine avoided using the word completely” (Fisher). In addition, one UN Country Team (UNCT) official in Myanmar was found to have “tried to stop human rights activists travelling to Rohingya areas, attempted to shut down public advocacy on the subject,

[and] isolated staff who tried to warn that ethnic cleansing might be on the way” (Fisher).

Clearly, the UN is failing to take action to stop the violence, and in some cases, may be directly participating in its cover up.

A further challenge to the resolution of the issue is the fact that the Myanmar government has legally isolated the Rakhine State to the point where outsiders cannot enter, and by denying the legitimacy of the group, the Myanmar government has made it impossible for international institutions to act (Kosem 213). So even if outside organizations wanted to help, they are legally prevented from doing so by the current Myanmar laws. For the moment, Muslim activists in Indonesia and other nearby Asian countries have resorted to protesting in order to try to raise international awareness of the issue (Goldman). The countries who have been most outspoken in defense of the Rohingya are mostly Muslim-majority nations such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Sun), though the nearby neighbors of Bangladesh and India are primarily concerned about influx of refugees and regional security, respectively. The Prime Minister of India has even taken the side of the government of Myanmar: “By siding with Aung San Suu Kyi, Modi is perceived as ignoring the mounting humanitarian and security challenges to Bangladesh” (Sun). Finally, even Pope Francis has failed to help the Rohingya, as he visited Myanmar in November to call attention to the issue, but never even mentioned the word “Rohingya” while in the country (Horowitz).

Research Design

As previously mentioned, I will be utilizing a discourse analysis-based Interpretivist research design in this study. This means that the primary sources for this design would be texts and other forms of discourse that summarize, discuss, and respond to the refugee crisis, rather than just numerical data. I would focus on four specific areas: news media, academia, political/governmental sources, and general populace/social media views. I have identified these specifically because I feel that there would be clear differences in the way that each of the groups views and discusses the issue, and they would have varying impacts on the status of the situation.

Some of the specific primary sources I could potentially include in my discourse analysis would be news articles (Fisher; Horowitz; Sun), speech transcripts/state visits (Pope Francis; Crawford), press releases and similar official reports (Nauert; “Statement on...”), and social media posts (Roth; Rannard). Each of these would provide insight into the different areas of interest that I have identified.

Interestingly, there are indeed examples of discourse that challenge the trend of diminishing news coverage and international attention focused on the Rohingya. These include meta news feature stories about why the world isn’t paying attention (Sun; Rannard), and those that criticize world leaders for failing to respond appropriately (Horowitz; Goldman). These kinds of documents look at and critique the world’s response itself, so it would be fascinating to include them and gain an inside view from those creating the discourse.

Accordingly, the majority of the key actors producing these primary sources are journalists, scholars, politicians, government leaders, international organizations, and other public figures like social media influencers. However, there is a discrepancy between the actors

producing the discourse, and those being affected by it, who are primarily the people of Myanmar, particularly the Muslim Rohingya minority being persecuted, killed, and displaced.

To further this point, there is clearly both an implicit and explicit power hierarchy among these actors, which would be important to keep in mind when deciding further details about the study. For example, those producing the discourse are rich, powerful, and influential, and their occupations and positions give them the explicit authority to shape the policies around the issue. They are also given implicit power through their access to a platform for putting out information and having people listen to them, whether it be an official press release, an article, or a social media post. In comparison, the Rohingya refugees do not hold positions of political power, nor do they have access to something like Twitter on a large scale. Therefore, there are multiple layers of power hierarchy that entrench the disparity between those creating the discourse and those being directly affected by it. In essence, the Rohingya have no ability to control their own story. Failing to account for that would contribute to the problem itself and further perpetuate the system that has so often ignored their perspective.

It is important to place this discourse relationship in the proper context of previous historical examples of genocide/ethnic conflict and the responses to them, both official and journalistic. One such example would be the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, where the UN and the West hesitated to take action, thereby prolonging the crisis and allowing it to escalate out of control. Recently, Al Jazeera interviewed an aid worker in Myanmar who had also been in Rwanda right before the genocide there escalated, and she said that the situation in Myanmar today is exhibiting many of the same warning signs (Fisher).

In addition, one should try to look at it through the lens of journalistic ethics and practices in order to understand the viewpoint of reporters and better define the role of journalism in this kind of a situation. All of these elements of contextualization are important for properly assessing the situation using discourse analysis.

With regards to the specific research context of the study, I propose to analyze international coverage and governmental response/recognition of the crisis, so this will involve current day discourse that takes place both on an international scale and within Myanmar itself. As a result of casting my research net so widely, a lot of the literature will be constantly updated, and sources will likely come from a wide range of backgrounds, which is not necessarily bad; rather, it is just another feature of the research design to account for.

My methods would include analyzing written discourse from open sources. My data selection process would likely cover speech transcripts (Pope Francis; Crawford), press releases (Nauert; “Statement on...”), news reports (Fisher; Horowitz; Sun), and other factual, official forms of discourse documents, as well as social media posts (Roth; Rannard). These texts are relevant to the research question because they transform subjective and fluid sentiments, policies, and actions into written documentation that can be studied and recorded for historical purposes. They also provide a ‘snapshot’ of a moment in time, so that one can analyze who knows what and when, which can then be used to show the evolution of different groups responses to the crisis. More specifically, the speech transcripts and press releases show what stance governments and important public figures wish to convey to a specific audience at a certain time, which is useful for understanding how they see the conflict itself. One example would be Pope Francis’ recent speeches, where he discussed at length the issues in Myanmar, but then when he visited

and gave a speech under the watch of the government of Myanmar, he did not mention the Rohingya by name. This shows differing messages being conveyed to different audiences. Then, the news reports are good for finding out what the most updated information is, and how much reporting or news investigation has been done on the topic. Similarly, a lot can be learned about the more informal national or international conversation around a topic from the number of social media interactions (such as the numbers of tweets using a specific hashtag) at a given time.

Also, I would pursue additional texts from a variety of sources to ensure that the entire range of viewpoints is accounted for. This would likely be necessary to determine the extent of the dispersion of the discourse; for example, one or two news articles on a specific topic is not likely to make much of an impact, but if every major news organization is writing about it every day, then clearly the story has spread and reached a much wider audience, likely as a result of being a more significant story. This also applies to tweets or other social media interactions as well; a few tweets about a topic implies a very different global conversation from a trending hashtag with millions of usages.

Now, it is common knowledge that writing and technology makes it difficult to convey the full range of meanings that would normally be present in a human interactions (such as sarcasm, or emphasis on a certain aspect). This has wide-ranging implications for discourse analysis. Obviously from the range in comments left on some internet news stories, people interpret written discourse very differently, and it would be important to account for that. This could be done by including a team of researchers to gain consensus on the true meaning, or using

input from a specialist to discern the most accurate interpretation possible as part of the validity process.

Trustworthiness throughout the study would be ensured through being open and honest about where all of the sources came from, and being sure to qualify and justify the use of certain non-academic sources when necessary. For example, one might use press releases from a hostile authoritarian government that is persecuting its own people, and in that case, it would be important to discuss why those specific sources are being used and for what purpose in the research project. Alternatively, using something like Facebook posts for some form of argument would require a similar qualifier and discussion about why they are the most relevant pieces of evidence to prove the argument and answer the research question, as opposed to any potential alternative sources. Overall, the most important thing to keep in mind is using certain sources only when there is some distinct quantity about them that means that no other source could possibly show the same evidence, and even then, they might be used as more of a “cultural artifact” than anything. One could also use other known sources to cross-reference or triangulate the information from any questionable sources.

In this research design, my own implicit biases and reflexivity would be very important to address, since one’s political views and preferences on news sources can cause bias in the selection of sources for analysis. This would make it fairly difficult to avoid being selective in deciding which sources are relevant, sufficiently scholarly, and authoritative enough to use as evidence. Therefore, I would address reflexivity by taking from a wide range of the most popular sources, regardless of their political bent, even if they are not ones that I would normally read for my own personal news content. In addition, I would have to expand my analysis beyond solely

American news outlets, since a lot of the most relevant content would originate from international news organizations like BBC News, Al Jazeera, or other less commonly known sources to an American. Al Jazeera in particular has placed a lot of emphasis on the Rohingya refugee crisis, and had I not been a student of international relations, I likely would not have seen most of that news coverage. This is an intrinsic challenge of using open data and having to sift through a flood of widely-available information to find the most pertinent sources possible. Therefore, the resulting bias cannot be completely removed, but with great efforts on the part of researchers, it can be mitigated to a great extent.

Discussion

Previously, my question revolved around analyzing country statistics (large-n research design) and comparing a few specific cases of ethnic violence (small-n research design). I initially thought that I would utilize one of those two designs for my study, but as I looked at my area of interest through the Interpretivist design lens, I realized that it was a more effective avenue for inquiry and would allow for a deeper level of analysis.

One benefit of this design is that since this question primarily focuses on open sources, they will be widely available and easy to obtain. What's more, the structure of the question means that the research actually requires very little cultural competence, despite being an issue in a country on the other side of the world with an entirely different cultural environment. This is made possible because the international media employs a vast number of translators that can interpret written and verbal communications from nearly every language almost instantly.

However, this reliance on media translators could pose a potential challenge/limitation to the research if the main issue at hand is a gap in the news media coverage. Potentially, we could be searching for information that either does not exist, has not been reported on, or has not been translated. Finally, just looking at the widely available and published sources would not accurately capture the entire picture, since it would be missing the perspective of the Rohingya, as I have mentioned before. Therefore, I would need to either account for that and attempt to include their viewpoints, or explicitly state that the research only involves discourse that originated outside of the Rohingya population.

As this semester comes to a close, I have given thought to some of the next steps in the research process that I would pursue in SISU-306. First of all, I would pick up where I left off by expanding and updating the literature review yet again. I would do this because the nature of the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis means that there is constantly new information available, with new sources to analyze. Then, I would gather my data from the four groups I have identified, using criteria for data selection that I would designate at that time. After that, I would analyze the data to identify trends, make comparisons, and ascertain similarities and differences among the ways that they discursively approach the Myanmar situation. Finally, I would assert my conclusions and write my final report.

In summary, literature on the topic of the Rohingya Crisis and ethnic conflict in general can be broken down into the topics of history, cross-cultural relations, and government action in order to better understand the current and past conversations around the issue. While some of the literature disagree on specific theoretical approaches that can be applied, nearly all of it agrees that the violence in Myanmar echoes past horrors and shows that the current situation is a dire

crisis that must be addressed. However, there seems to be a lack of international attention to the issue, which is why I plan to analyze the news media, academic, and political/governmental discourse around this topic and determine the true effect of this attention gap. Each day that the international community remains ignorant or inactive on the subject further intensifies the issue as the government continues to violate the civil and human rights of its own citizens without reproach, and the first step to action is understanding the discursive context in which the crisis exists, so that the world can determine how to protect the Rohingya and bring peace to the country of Myanmar.

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