As the daughter of an FBI agent, I have grown up on my Father’s tales of thrilling
criminal investigations. Although these were my favorite bedtime stories, my lack of
coordination prevented me from pursuing the same career path as my Dad. However, during my
Freshman year at GW, I found that academic research allowed me to orchestrate exhilarating
investigations of my own. My University Writing research project, complete with its own
challenges, breakthroughs, and important results, taught me the value and excitement of
conducting significant research.

As part of my University Writing course, I was prompted to conduct a research project on
a topic relevant to the discourse of political psychology. I wanted to choose a topic that I felt
passionate about, as this would assist in carrying out the extensive research process which lay
ahead. While most of the material covered throughout the course related to domestic politics, as
an International Affairs student, my true passion lay in current events abroad. After asking my
professor if I could research a topic relating to world politics, I decided to center my project on
the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar.

I felt that this topic was an extremely important subject of analysis, given its
humanitarian consequences and the recent debate surrounding the classification of the violence. I
had learned in class that while some had proclaimed that the Crisis fit the label of “genocide”,
others insisted that “ethnic conflict” offered a more fitting definition. In the past, the world’s
inaccurate portrayal of the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides as ethnic cleansing contributed to
international reluctance to intervene and end the atrocities. I wanted my research project to study
this debate on the Rohingya Crisis and investigate whether depictions of the atrocity as ethnic
conflict discouraged international intervention.
The discrepancies between these differing characterizations of the Rohingya Crisis reminded me of the theories of framing which had been covered in my University Writing class. Theories of framing describe how using different lenses to view an issue can manipulate an audience’s opinions. I decided to investigate how policymakers had framed the Rohingya Crisis, and how framing the violence as ethnic conflict instead of genocide might hold grave implications. To achieve this, I would examine State Department reports on the violence in Myanmar for evidence of frames which painted the Rohingya Crisis as either genocide or ethnic conflict.

To begin my research, my class met with librarian David Ettinger, who introduced us to the resources of our campus’ libraries which could aid our research processes. He demonstrated how to ensure the quality of our sources by searching for peer-reviewed sources and academic journals. With this in mind, I developed four main categories or sources which I needed to find. To begin, I needed to identify background sources on the Rohingya Crisis itself. Second, I needed to search for State Department documents to serve as exhibits for my analysis. Next, I needed to locate sources which supported my argument, particularly articles examining the implications of depicting genocidal violence as either ethnic cleansing. Finally, in order to support my use of framing as a method of analysis, I needed sources that studied the employment of frames by policymakers.

Yet, as I began searching through Gelman’s databases, I had difficulty finding sources relevant to my project. While I could not locate sources regarding the use of framing by policymakers, I came across a peer-reviewed article which studied framing of genocide by the media. This article demonstrated how journalistic framing of the Rwandan Genocide as ethnic
conflict prevented international intervention. This source proved monumental to my research project. It led me to redefine my research to analyze media reports on the Rohingya Crisis instead of governmental documents. Moreover, this article concluded that the ‘ethnic conflict’ frame was primarily used within Western media due to the West’s preconceptions of the developing world as unstable and wrought with ethnic strife. Because of this, I decided to analyze both Western and non-Western media exhibits in my project, in order to test for this bias. Finally, the reference section of the article provided me with an abundance of additional sources which I used to substantiate my research and overcome the drought of material I had been facing.

At this point, I was able to construct a clear vision of my research project and conduct my analysis, utilizing my sources to support the results of my investigation. After completing the research process, my project was able to confirm that Western media did portray the Rohingya Crisis as genocide less often than non-Western media, and that this fostered hesitant policy responses from the international community. Uncovering these results showed me that strategic, informed, and meticulous research can produce important conclusions about the topics which I am most passionate about.

This process revived the excitement that I felt as a kid listening to my Dad’s investigation stories, gripping the covers of my bed in suspense as he recounted connecting scattered clues to produce a breakthrough just in time to catch a criminal. Using the resources of the libraries at GW allowed me to work through the challenges of my own investigation and generate meaningful insights, teaching me the immense value of academic inquiry.
The Question of Genocide: 
Journalistic Framing of the Rohingya Crisis

In response to the atrocities taking place in Myanmar, this study utilizes theories of journalistic framing to analyze reports from Western and non-Western sources on the Rohingya crisis. Scholarly studies of conflict framing have identified ‘Ethnic Conflict’ and ‘Genocide’ as competing frames within media coverage on genocidal violence. Each of these frames provoke contrasting moral and policy responses. Furthermore, these studies have shown that media in the West is more likely to misconstrue genocide through use of the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame due to preconceptions of the developing world as unstable and wrought with ethnic tension. This study investigates news articles covering the Rohingya crisis from the New York Times and The Hindu for evidence of ‘Ethnic Conflict’ and ‘Genocide’ frames. These exhibits are further analyzed to identify patterns within how each of the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ and ‘Genocide’ frames utilize generic journalistic frames. This study hypothesizes that non-Western media will employ the ‘Genocide’ frame more often, and that ‘Genocide’ exhibits will draw more heavily on generic Morality and Responsibility frames. The findings of this study affirm these predictions but reveal surprising trends, offering important insight into the future of the Rohingya crisis.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Rohingya crisis in 2016, over 727,000 refugees have fled the violence into neighboring Bangladesh (OCHA, 2019). At least 10,000 have died in a campaign of mass rape, execution, and village destruction carried out by security forces in Myanmar (Kirby, 2018; Williams & Levy, 2018). The Rohingya, a minority ethnic Muslim group in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, have faced oppression for years. The Myanmar government has denied them citizenship, making them one of the largest groups of stateless peoples in the world (Specia, 2017). The pervasive violations of the rights of the Rohingya have forced them to live in apartheid conditions (Neistat, 2017). The Rohingya may be the most persecuted ethnic minority group across the globe (Hoque, 2018).

In response to this injustice, in October 2016, 300 Rohingya insurgents (members of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) attacked state police posts, killing nine officers (Hunt, 2017).
Following this incident, state security forces orchestrated a brutal campaign of violence against the Rohingya. Despite accusations of crimes against humanity, the Myanmar government continues to deny allegations while the violence persists today (Hunt, 2017).

A recent report published by PILPG, a pro-bono international law firm hired by the State Department, has concluded that the violence in Myanmar fits the legal definition of Genocide (Williams & Levy, 2018). Invoking this definition means that the state has carried out atrocities with the intent to destroy, in part or in whole, the Rohingya ethnicity (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). However, others have denied this characterization. Classifying the Rohingya crisis as genocide holds major implications for the international community, as many countries have obligations under international law to respond when genocide occurs (United Nations General Assembly, 1948; Williams & Levy, 2018). The debate over the characterization of the violence has intensified as connections have been drawn between the Rohingya crisis and the Rwandan Genocide (Williams & Levy, 2018). These comparisons have prompted warnings that if the international community continues to deny the graveness of the violence, mass atrocities could occur once again while the world sits idly by (Williams & Levy, 2018). Because of this, the Rohingya crisis is an important subject of analysis. Studies of the journalistic framing of this calamity promise to uncover important insights regarding its future, and the possibility of relief for the Rohingya peoples. This study will examine the media’s characterization of the conflict and how this might impact international policy responses.

**Overview of Journalistic Framing**

This study will open with a discussion of journalistic framing, particularly within its importance to conflict studies. An overview will be given of the framework involved in media
portrayal of genocidal conflict. History demonstrates that the framework used by journalists in these cases can hold immense implications for international responses to the violence.

Journalistic framing refers to the media’s practice of construing and presenting issues through lenses which impact the public’s conceptualization and opinions of these issues. As journalistic framing provides a medium through which the media can manipulate public opinion, and thereby public policy, framing provides an interesting tool of analysis to employ when investigating current events (Godefroidt, Berbers & d’Haenens, 2016). Scholars have not identified a set number of journalistic frames but have rather concluded that every issue possesses its own unique set of frames that are used by the media (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Rogan, 2007). However, those investigating theories of framing have established a standardized method for analyzing journalistic frames. This method consists of selecting an issue, isolating a specific attitude, identifying a set of frames to construct a coding scheme, and applying this scheme to content selected for analysis (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Utilizing this method to analyze media portrayal of conflicts is a particularly important area of framing studies. Journalistic framing can play an especially important role in conflicts; framing has the potential to impact the public understanding of, and policy response to, international disputes. Democratic governments like the United States rely on public perception to formulate policy. Therefore, the role of journalistic framing in altering public conceptions can have vital policy implications. Depending on how the conflict is construed, the public may push for, or against, intervention (Boettcher, 2004). This will impact the intractability of the conflict, which may be further worsened if the media’s framework impacts the viewpoints of the parties to the dispute in a way that prevents mutual understanding or reconciliation of their stances (Shmueli, Elliott, & Kaufman, 2006).
Scholars have identified six generic frames utilized by the media: Conflict, Economic Impact, Morality, Human Interest, Nationalization, and Responsibility (Godefroidt, 2016). A Conflict frame attracts the interest of the reader through an exploration of a dispute. Economic Impact frames focus on how events affect economies. Morality frames often employ pathos and investigate the moral consequences of different issues. Human interest frames focus on personal stories to portray the impact of events on individuals, often utilizing moral appeals in the process. A nationalization frame is used by the media to present issues through the viewpoint of a specific country. Finally, Responsibility frames present discussions that distribute blame for consequences of events (Godefroidt, 2016). Apart from these generic frames, a more specific framework has been identified within media coverage of genocidal conflict (Hammond, 2018, pg. 435). This dichotomous framework applies different combinations of these generic frames to communicate vastly different depictions of the violence concerned.

**Framing of Genocide**

Particularly imperative to studying media portrayal of genocide are the frames of ‘Ethnic Conflict’ and ‘Genocide’. These two frames construct competing narratives when applied to genocidal conflict (Hammond, 2018). An ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame, characterized by language insinuating tribal or ethnic divisions, paints a picture of conflicts as “understood to involve distributed blame, to be seen as complex and intractable (based on ‘ancient hatreds’, for example), and to invite an arms-length response from the international community” (Hammond, 2018, p. 435). This frame draws attention to tribalization and utilizes dichotomous language. By causing the public to view the conflict as too convoluted to understand, the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame sparks a sense of disempowerment and hopelessness which can foster isolationist policy responses (Hammond, 2018; Chari, 2010; Kent, 2006; Kuperman, 2003). On the contrary, the
‘Genocide’ frame, characterized by use of the term “genocide” and attribution of blame to a single actor, portrays the conflict as consisting of clear victims and perpetrators. This frame characterizes violence as stemming from a plot to exterminate an entire group of civilians (Hammond, 2018). Through communicating that a party to the conflict has clear intentions to eliminate a group based on religion, ethnicity, race, or nationality (United Nations General Assembly, 1948), the media invokes the legal definition of genocide and pressures policy responses to rescue the victims. Due to the competing narratives and responses they create, these frames are highly consequential to genocidal conflict, indicating the importance of studying their use in media coverage of crises today (Hammond, 2018; Kent, 2006).

**Case Studies: Rwanda and Bosnia**

The heavy impact these frames have on policy responses to genocidal conflicts can be seen through an analysis of the Rwandan and Bosnian genocides. Scholars studying the framing of these crises have found evidence of widespread use of the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame in Western media coverage (Chari, 2010; Kent, 2016; Kuperman, 2003). The portrayal of the massacre in Rwanda as a long-rooted, tribal conflict failed to encapsulate the historical, political, or social context of the event. Further, this portrayal implied that the violence had distributed moral blame and a high level of intractability, contributing to a reluctant and passive response from the international community (Chari, 2010; Kuperman, 2003; Miller, 2004; Thompson, 2007). The world failed to act, standing by as nearly one million people were killed in around 100 days (Miller, 2004; Thompson, 2007). Perhaps, if the media had constructed a narrative which revealed that the violence was rooted in an extermination plan drafted by members of the government, international action would have been more acute, and deaths may have been prevented (Hammond, 2018).
Similarly, scholars have identified a heavy presence of the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame in Western coverage of the Bosnian genocide. While this conflict was a one-sided massacre perpetrated by the Serbs under the Milosevic regime, the media often presented the issue to the public as a conflict based on internal ethnic antagonism (Kent, 2006; Hammond, 2018; Thompson, 2007). This contributed to a sense of “moral equalization” (Kent, 2006) of the groups involved, stalling international response. The implications that the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ lens can have for genocidal conflicts are extensive and severe, as these frames may mask crimes against humanity and encourage reluctant international responses while civilian populations are decimated (Chari, 2010; Hammond, 2018; Kent, 2006; Kuperman, 2003; Miller, 2004; Thompson, 2007). For this reason, as the world witnesses genocidal violence once again, studies of journalistic framing of the conflict in Myanmar are critical.

Methods

In order to determine whether the media has portrayed the Rohingya crisis through either the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ or ‘Genocide’ frames, an analysis of reports from the *New York Times* and *The Hindu* was conducted using theories of journalistic framing. Because the misconstruction of genocidal conflicts through an ‘Ethnic Conflict’ lens has been attributed to Western tendencies to view developing countries as unstable and wrought with ethnic strife (Kent, 2006; Hammond, 2018; Chari, 2010; Kuperman, 2003; Miller, 2004; Thompson, 2007), this study uses an analysis of reports from a non-Western source (*The Hindu*) as a control. Reports from the time frame of 2016-2017 were gathered from each of these sources. This time frame was chosen both to limit the number of exhibits to a manageable number for analysis and because the frame encompasses the conflict’s climax: the military onslaught of the Rohingya sparked after Rohingya insurgents attacked border posts in the Rakhine State (Hunt, 2017). The year following this event witnessed
the pinnacle of the state-ordered campaign of violence against the Rohingya civilians. The exhibits were chosen through a search conducted using databases held by each of the sources, applying the key words, “Rohingya” and “violence”. Articles were eliminated if they were not full in length or only gave news updates on the crisis, as these would be less revealing for a study of journalistic framing. To obtain a manageably sized collection of exhibits while protecting against bias, the articles from both sources were assigned numbers, and fifteen exhibits were randomly selected from each using a random number generator.

After collecting a population of thirty exhibits (fifteen from each source), the articles were subjected to analysis to identify ‘Ethnic Conflict’ and ‘Genocide’ frames. To conduct this analysis, coding schemes were first constructed for each of the frames. Using scholarly studies of ‘Ethnic Conflict’ and ‘Genocide’ frames, coding schemes were drafted which incorporated keywords and characteristics belonging to each frame. An article would code for the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame if it included keywords such as “tribal conflict”, “ethnic war”, “ethnic conflict”, or “ethnic violence”. Further, if the violence was construed as two-sided and based on long-standing ethnic animosities, the article would also be coded for the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame. Conversely, if the article included language such as “genocide”, “genocidal acts”, “genocidal intentions”, or references attributing the violence solely to state-sanctioned plans of extermination, the article would code for the ‘Genocide’ frame. If the article characterized the violence as a crime against humanity, and made clear identifications of the perpetrators, without attributing blame to ethnic tensions, it would also be coded for the ‘Genocide’ frame. This coding scheme was applied to each of the exhibits, and the exhibits were recorded as employing the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame, ‘Genocide’ frame, or both (if elements of each of these schemes
were present). To protect against bias, coding was completed after removing the titles of the articles, to ensure that the source of the exhibit was not known.

To continue, another coding scheme was constructed in order to identify the generic frames present within the exhibits. An article coded for the Conflict frame if it focused on a discussion of discord or disagreement. If the article centered on economic impacts of the violence, it coded for the Economic Impact frame. If the article depicted the violence through the lens of its impact on a specific country, it coded for the Nationalization frame. If moral appeals or dilemmas dominated the discourse of the exhibit, the article coded for the Morality frame. If personal stories were a substantial subject of the exhibit, the article coded for the Human Interest frame. Finally, if the exhibit engaged in significant discussion regarding where the blame for the violence was to be allocated, the article coded for the Responsibility frame (Godefroidt, 2016).

After completing the analysis of the exhibits, the results were organized to reveal the prevalence of each of the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ and ‘Genocide’ frames in the reporting from both the Western and non-Western sources. Results were further collected to reveal the presence of the six generic frames within exhibits classified as ‘Ethnic Conflict’, ‘Genocide’, or both. Finally, the utilization of the generic frames by exhibits in each of these categories was compared across coverage from the New York Times and The Hindu.

**Findings**
*An additional exhibit within this data set coded for Morality and Responsibility frames, but this was disregarded, as the exhibit employed these frames in a discussion of how moral blame and responsibility for the violence could not be clearly attributed. Therefore, as the frames were used to evade moral issues and accountability for the crisis, their use fell outside of the traditional definitions and applications of these frames. Because of this, the exhibit was recorded as only containing the “conflict” frame.

The findings of this study affirmed two important hypotheses, but also revealed surprising and interesting trends. First, an analysis of the presence of ‘Ethnic Conflict’ and ‘Genocide’ frames within Western and non-Western news sources ratified the hypothesis that Western news sources would utilize ‘Genocide’ frames at a lesser rate than non-Western sources. Exhibits from *The Hindu* employed the ‘Genocide’ frame within most of their coverage (at a rate of 53.34%), whereas exhibits from the *New York Times* utilized this frame in only a third of their coverage. Contrary to expectation, however, the use of the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame was not exceptionally dominant throughout Western coverage: exhibits from the *New York Times* applied each of the frames evenly. In fact, both the *New York Times* and *The Hindu* employed the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame at the same rate (33.33%). This contradicts the expectation that the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame would be overwhelming in Western coverage, even while the hypothesis that this frame would constitute a lesser portion of non-Western exhibits was confirmed.
Further, the findings also confirmed the hypothesis that coverage displaying the ‘Genocide’ frame would apply Responsibility and Morality frames more often. The Responsibility frame was present in 65% of the exhibits which utilized the ‘Genocide’ frame. This rate was even higher within ‘Genocide’ exhibits from the New York Times, as these used the Responsibility frame at a rate of 90%. 25% of exhibits which coded for the ‘Genocide’ frame employed the generic Morality frame. The exhibits which coded for elements of both the ‘Genocide’ and the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame had mixed results: about 85% of these coded for use of the Responsibility frame, but 0% coded for use of the morality frame. Overall, ‘Genocide’ exhibits adopted the Responsibility and Morality frames at a much higher frequency than the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ exhibits, confirming expectations.

Discussion of Findings

The increased rate of the use of the ‘Genocide’ frame within exhibits from the Hindu is consistent with literature examining journalistic framing of similar conflicts, which attributes the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame to a Western bias (Kent, 2006; Hammond, 2018; Chari, 2010; Kuperman, 2003; Miller, 2004; Thompson, 2007; Brooten, 2015). The findings of this study support the idea that Western states have a poor understanding of the social and political contexts of the developing world, often viewing these states as helpless, unstable, and eternally wrought with conflict (Hammond, 2018; Chari, 2010; Thompson, 2007; Brooten, 2015). This leads Western countries to fail to respond to cases of genocide and misconstrue the violence as ‘Ethnic Conflict’ (Hammond, 2018). These findings affirm that the media within Western states is more likely to frame genocide as ‘Ethnic Conflict’, indicating that the trend of Western states failing to respond to genocide will continue to pose challenges for the international community.
However, the findings of this study reveal an optimistic trend as well. Contrary to expectations, and in contrast with historical parallels, Western media was highly varied in its use of the ‘Genocide’ and ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frames throughout reports on the Rohingya crisis (Chari, 2010; Kent, 2016; Kuperman, 2003). In fact, exhibits from the *New York Times* applied each of these frames at the same rate. Although this divide has prevented Western media from offering a clear characterization of the conflict as genocide, the results of this study demonstrate that progress has been made: Western media were found to use the ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frame at lower rates than they have in the past (Chari, 2010; Kent, 2016; Kuperman, 2003).

A potential explanator for this progress could be the “Responsibility to Protect” (“R2P”) movement, which attempted to transform international approaches to human rights violations following the Rwandan and Yugoslav genocides (Evans & Sahnoun, 2001). The movement, which originated in the early 2000s, revolutionized international affairs scholarship (Homans, 2011). Proponents of “R2P” argued that every state has the responsibility to protect the rights of its citizens. Upon failure to do so, this responsibility shifts to the international community, who is obligated to intervene in response to mass human rights violations. Supporters of the “R2P” doctrine contended that this would prevent crimes against humanity, including genocide (Evans & Sahnoun, 2001). “R2P” was endorsed as a political commitment by all member states of the United Nations in 2005, but its application and enforcement since have not been consistent (Evans & Sahnoun, 2001). Nevertheless, this movement spurred scholarship on potential means to improve international responses to genocide. If the movement succeeded in popularizing the belief that governments have a responsibility to intervene when genocide occurs, it may have caused media to be more attentive to reports of genocidal violence, and more inclined to pressure governments to respond. Therefore, "R2P” may explain the findings of this study which show
that contrary to expectations, Western media utilize the ‘Genocide’ and ‘Ethnic Conflict’ frames evenly.

Finally, the alignment of the generic frames of ‘Responsibility’ and ‘Morality’ with the ‘Genocide’ exhibits remains consistent with literature characterizing the ‘Genocide’ frame. As conveyed in the coding scheme of this study, use of the ‘Genocide’ frame implies that these exhibits communicate a one-sided distribution of moral blame. Articles coded for the ‘Genocide’ frame if they clearly placed blame for the conflict on state security forces (Hammond, 2018). Thus, the character of the ‘Genocide’ frame necessitated discussion on the responsibility for, and moral implications of, the conflict. For this reason, ‘Responsibility’ and ‘Morality’ frames appeared at a higher rate in ‘Genocide’ exhibits, validating the second hypothesis of the study.

**Conclusion**

Overall, three important conclusions can be drawn from the results of this study. First, this study affirms the hypothesis that a larger portion of non-Western media would portray the violence in Myanmar through the ‘Genocide’ frame as compared to Western media. Secondly, findings demonstrate that this disparity between Western and non-Western media was not as significant as expected (considering historical trends). This demonstrates that the media is capable of reform in its portrayal of genocidal violence. Finally, this study identifies patterns within how the ‘Genocide’ frame draws on generic journalistic frames. The identification of these patterns allows a deeper understanding of the ‘Genocide’ frame, offering an important contribution to potential media efforts to reform.

The results of this study suggest that relief for the Rohingya in Myanmar is unlikely to be delivered in the foreseeable future. Still, unexpected trends indicate that progress is possible, showing that studies on media coverage of genocidal violence will retain their importance in the
future. The heavy implications drawn from this study verify that theories of journalistic framing offer an important means of analysis to policymakers surveying the future of international crises and global responses to them.

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