This book uses the term ‘ethnicity’ broadly to refer to the ‘subjective, symbolic, or emblematic use by a group of people of any aspect of culture in order to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from other groups’ (Brass 1991: 19). This understanding of ethnicity recognizes that the internal and external functions of group identity are cohesion and differentiation. Central to this sense of identity is a shared belief in common descent, birth or kinship which may be (but usually is not) based on biological fact.

The attempt to understand the role of sub-groups in ethnic conflict through a review of the literature proves unsatisfying. It reveals an overwhelming focus on inter-group relations, treating ethnic groups as homogenous entities, employing what is described in the introduction as a ‘billiard ball’ model of ethnic conflict – solid masses moving at different speeds and on different trajectories, sometimes colliding. Conspicuously absent is a recognition of the need to ‘read between the lines’ – or more accurately ‘within the lines’ – of ethnic groups in conflict, that is, to consider the internal structure and dynamics of groups and to assess the ways in which these affect inter-ethnic group relations in conflict situations. Although the inter-group level of analysis is useful in illuminating some features of inter-ethnic relations, it is, for example, unable to explain when steadily improving inter-ethnic relations are ‘suddenly’ shattered by violent outbursts.\(^1\) Often the outbreak of inter-ethnic violence is preceded not by a deterioration of inter-group relations, but by changes in intra-group relations. Thus, sub-groups are also important units of analysis. Although a chronological sequence of events does not necessarily indicate a causal relationship, it appears that under certain conditions intra-ethnic group relations exercise an overriding influence on inter-ethnic group rela-
tions – often in quite unexpected ways. The reverse can also be true: under certain conditions inter-ethnic relations exercise an overriding influence on intra-ethnic relations.²

This leads to the unsatisfactory proposition that inter-ethnic group relations may both condition and be conditioned by intra-group dynamics. Further, intra-group dynamics may have a variable impact; sometimes exacerbating and sometime dampening inter-ethnic conflict. While a reading of the literature on ethnic conflict may prompt the observation that the intra-group dimension of inter-ethnic conflict is both interesting and neglected, it remains to be demonstrated exactly why and how the intra-group dimension is related to inter-group conflict dynamics, and vice versa. Concomitantly, it needs to be demonstrated how these linkages relate to policy alternatives and conflict management. This requires more than the examination of the correlation of inter-group and intra-group conflict by charting the coincidence of the two, since such an approach would be unable to consider those instances when changes in the intra-group arena are not coincident with a change at the inter-group level. Rather, it is necessary to examine the relationship between these levels of interaction by asking when and why changes at one level have – or do not have – an impact on the behavior of actors at another level under conditions of violent ethnic conflict.

This study does not venture a full-blown theory of ethnic politics. It does not make assertions of universal, invariant causal relationships between independent and dependent variables. Rather, it focuses attention on what are judged to be crucial mediating factors in conflictual ethnic politics without imposing a priori assumptions of causality among them.³ While each of these mediating factors can be analytically separate and discrete, in practice they interact and affect each other. Thus, for example, the mobilization of group identity and the mobilization and extraction of resources may be mutually reinforcing in certain cases. Rather than try to disentangle them artificially, it is better to recognize the possibility of interdependence and to draw insights from case studies into when, why and how they interact. Taken together mediating structures represent a series of prisms which focus or diffuse both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations to make them more or less conflictual, indeed, more or less violent.

Patterns of violence

Often, ‘empirical’ studies of ethnic conflict count up instances of violence within a case and point to the final total as some kind of