

## Identity Issues

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July 2003

### "Us" versus "Them"

Israelis and Palestinians, India and Pakistan, governments and insurgents, Protestants and Catholics, whites and blacks, labor and management...these are all examples of *identities* that have at some times and some places resulted in intractable conflicts.

For an inter-group (e.g., racial, ethnic, or religious) conflict to occur, the opponents must have a sense of collective identity about themselves and about their adversary, each side believing the fight is between "us" and "them." Some of those conflicts become intractable, persisting destructively for a very long time, despite efforts to resolve them. In some such conflicts the antagonists seem to be fighting each other about the identities that they hold about themselves and those they attribute to the other side. Such conflicts are sometimes called identity-based conflicts and regarded as particularly prone to becoming intractable.



This essay examines: (1) the characteristics of various kinds of identities, (2) how particular qualities of collective identities contribute to a conflict becoming intractable, (3) what shapes collective identities, and (4) how such identities can be modified to help transform and resolve intractable conflicts.

### The Nature of Identity

Developing a sense of self is an essential part of every individual becoming a mature person. Each person's self-conception is a unique combination of many identifications, identifications as broad as *woman* or *man*, *Catholic* or *Muslim*, or as narrow as being a member of one particular family. Although self-identity may seem to coincide with a particular human being, identities are actually much wider than that. They are also collective -- identities extend to countries and ethnic communities, so that people feel injured when other persons sharing their identity are injured or killed. Sometimes people are even willing to sacrifice their individual lives to preserve their identity group(s). Palestinian suicide bombers are a well-publicized example.

For the large, inter-group struggles discussed in this essay and much of this Web site, collective identities are necessary.[1] People who share the same collective identity think of themselves as having a common interest and a common fate.

Some of the many identities people have are nested within each other, usually compatibly, as is the case for geographic identities within a country. For example, I can identify both with New York (my state) and the United States (my country). However, some identities may compete with each other, as occurs in wars of secession. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s many people living in what was then Yugoslavia felt pride in having stood up to the Soviet Union in 1948 and in creating a new economic system. Yet in the 1990s, most people in Yugoslavia felt that their identities as Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Muslims, or Bosnians were more salient than their identity as Yugoslavs.

## Sources of Identity

Identities are constructed on the basis of various traits and experiences. Many of those characteristics are open to different interpretations. Race is a good example. Skin color is an important marker of identity in many societies, but in others it is of minimal importance. Many people in the United States assign relatively great importance to skin color; furthermore, they tend to dichotomize color into black and white, claiming that having any African ancestry, even over several generations, may make a person identify with being black. But in other countries race is partly defined by traits that may be acquired later in life. For example, in Mexico, "Indians" can become "Mestizos" by wearing Western clothing and speaking Spanish.

Similarly, some analysts speak of ethnicity as a primordial phenomenon, relatively ancient and unchanging. Other analysts stress that ethnicity is socially constructed, with people choosing a history and common ancestry and creating, as much as discovering, differences from others.[2] In this essay, I consider ethnicity to be largely socially constructed, while I recognize that some traits of ethnicity are not easily modified by social processes.

For instance, some traits are fixed at birth, such as parental ethnicity and religion, place of birth, and skin color. Other traits may be acquired or modified later, such as language spoken, religion practiced, clothing worn, or food eaten. Insofar as the traits chosen to define membership in an ethnicity are determined at birth, ethnic status is *ascribed*; and insofar as they are modified or acquired in later life, ethnic status is *achieved*.

Many identities, then, are not based on ascribed traits but on shared values, beliefs, or concerns, which are varyingly open to acquisition by choice. This includes shared religious adherence -- indeed, members of many religious communities proselytize to win converts to their faith. This is also true for political ideologies, attachment to particular pieces of land, or practicing a particular way of life.

Identities vary in many other ways. They are self-designations and also attributions made about other persons. They can endure for generations or change with shifting situations. They can exclude or include. And since everyone has multiple identities, their relative importance and compatibility differs in various times and circumstances.

## Identity Effects on Intractability

Collective identities are inherent in social life, whether part of a conflict or not. When and how identities contribute to intractable conflicts depends greatly on the content of the identities held. Certain qualities of identities contribute significantly to the intractability of conflicts, and whether those conflicts are constructive or destructive.

**Persistent Identities:** Protracted conflicts are made possible by enduring identities, often based on ascribed characteristics. Thus, the protracted nature of many ethnic conflicts depends on the persistence of the ethnic groups, deriving from socialization within the group and from suffering resulting from discrimination and exclusion by other ethnic groups. For example, the survival of Jews as an ethnic group, even without a single territorial base, has derived from socialization within the community about Jewish religious and cultural qualities and from external anti-Semitism.

**Primary Identities:** The primacy or importance of an identity is another quality that affects its contribution to the persistence of a conflict. Persons and groups have multiple identities, but the identities are not all equally significant to them. Conflicts related to highly significant identities have a tendency to persist, since threats to those identities are not easily put aside.[3] For instance, particular pieces of land can be key elements of identity, whether they are the village, region, or country of birth and ancestral attachment. When land is a key focus of identity, struggles over that land can become protracted. This is often the case for aboriginal peoples in territories controlled by later settlers.

**Non-Compromising Identities:** The nature of the collective identities also affects the difficulty in reaching an accommodation between conflicting groups. Members of groups with identities that place a high priority on being honored and being treated with deference may have difficulty making compromises for or respecting other groups. Furthermore, some self-conceptions relating to ideas of sovereignty, authority, and legitimacy constitute barriers to successful settlement of a conflict.

**Views of the "Other:"** Many other attributes of identities affect the way conflicts are conducted. Certainly, the character attributed to the adversary is often related to the destructiveness of a conflict. If people in the enemy collectivity are viewed as subhuman, even denigrated as vermin, they are more easily subjected to gross human rights violations and even extermination attempts. If enemy people are regarded as evil, then extreme methods are justified to destroy them. Obviously, the targets of such characterizations will reject them and may subsequently reciprocate them.

Even less extreme characterizations of the other group can contribute to a conflict's intractability. This may occur when one group's identity is fashioned in opposition to another. For example, during the Cold War, an important aspect of American identity for many people in the United States was to be anti-Communist.

**Inclusivity:** In addition, identities vary in their exclusiveness or inclusiveness, the degree to which people who do not yet share the identity may be welcomed to do so or be excluded. Inclusive identities are less prone to foster intractable conflict.

**Nationalism:** Considerable attention for many years has been given to nationalism as a source of intractable conflicts. Nationalism as an ideology asserts that nations or groups of people who share a common history and destiny have the right to have a territory or state of their own. Given the movement and intermingling of people on earth and the changing political systems of the world, such a right for everyone is not realizable. Furthermore, nationalist sentiments often are a variant of ethnocentrism, the tendency to see one's own group as superior and more deserving of respect than all others.[4] This is particularly evident when nationalist sentiments are shaped by ethnic identities. They are less evident in civic nationalism, which affirms citizenship in a country as obtainable by all who choose to live there.[5] Furthermore, it is indeed possible for people to be patriotic, celebrating their own people or country, without denigrating or dominating other peoples or countries.

**Victimhood:** Another important characteristic of identities is the degree to which people hold identities that incorporate their sense that they have generally been victims of oppression and domination by others. Such conceptions tend to make people feel threatened and mistrustful. Fearing attacks, they may act to prevent them, but in ways that the other side likewise experiences as threats. The result can be self-perpetuating destructive struggles.

**Adversarial Identities:** Finally, a conflict's intractability depends upon the identities of the adversary. Identities can mesh with each other in ways that are more or less destructive. Two groups with ethno-nationalist identities and with attachment to some of the same land are prone to engage in an intractable conflict. However, a group with an ethno-nationalist identity and even a high sense of superiority may avoid an intractable conflict with a group that has identities emphasizing other-worldly religious concerns.

## Shapers of Identity

Three settings shape collective identities: (1) internal factors within each group, (2) relations with adversary groups, and (3) the social context of the groups' interaction. Each setting is discussed in turn.

### (1) Internal Factors and Processes

Certain characteristics of group members affect their identities and their views of the groups with which they

are in opposition.

**Universal Human Needs:** Some conflict resolution analysts and practitioners argue that all people and groups are driven to attain certain basic and universal human needs. Among these, they say, are recognition, security, and identity.[6] Human needs theorists and practitioners believe that the frustration of these needs underlies many social conflicts. Since such needs are non-negotiable, they argue, an inability to attain these needs often leads to intractable conflict. Other theorists and practitioners, however, stress the cultural variability in the way needs are understood and certainly in the ways in which they are satisfied.[7] This is the approach taken in this essay.

**Past Experience:** Past experience, for example, is an important influence on a conflict's intractability. Groups may pass on the heritage of suffering and of enmities arising from historical traumatic events.[8] Of course, if those events are to shape contemporary identities, they must be kept alive in families, schools, and religious institutions, and sometimes aroused and amplified by political leaders, intellectuals, or other influential persons. If that occurs, identities tend to form that foster intractable conflicts.

**Adversarial Attitudes:** Various cultural patterns prevalent within a society, group, or organization contribute to a conflict's intractability.[9] These patterns include a predilection, for example, not to trust members of other groups, to denigrate them, or to act with hostility toward them. Specific ideologies and ways of thinking also contribute to conflict intractability. Thus, people in a group with a collective identity significantly based on racism would tend to denigrate others they regard as inherently inferior and feel free to act in destructive ways against the inferior beings. This is likely to result in determined resistance and protracted destructive struggle.

**Leadership:** Finally, it should be recognized that political and religious leaders play important roles in shaping identities. Leaders put forward identities that include some people while excluding others. They may expect to benefit from the construction and strengthening of exclusive identities, privileging their own language or religion and gaining power by arousing emotions against other groups and peoples. For example, Hitler and the Nazis helped create an extreme racist German identity that contributed greatly to the destructiveness of the wars Germany undertook.

## (2) Relations with Adversaries

Identities are profoundly shaped by interactions molded in conflict, and in turn influence the course of a conflict.[10]

**Violence and Coercion:** Antagonistic interactions with large components of violence and other forms of coercion tend to produce identities incorporating toughness in resisting coercion and in imposing it on others. Members of the group who act tough are then celebrated by other members of their group and held up as models to be emulated as exemplars to people in their camp. At the same time, members of the opposing side are likely to be seen as cruel and vicious and bearing hatred. Such views hamper transformation of an intractable conflict, since people in the other camp will tend to reciprocate the hostile behavior and ways of characterizing people.

**Negative Characterizations:** Such interactions are never wholly symmetrical. If a group is relatively powerful, it will try to impose its definitions on other groups. The Nazis' violent imposition of their characterization of who and what Jews were stands as a grotesque example of that tendency. In most instances, the imposition of a definition and characterization is less organized and violent; but some degree of imposition is discernable in many relationships.

**Positive Relationships:** Not all interactions between adversaries, however, are adversarial; usually some members of the opposing sides engage in particular interactions that are mutually desired and even cooperative. Some people may be engaged in profitable economic transactions with the other side or they may collaborate in

cultural or research activities. Having a large proportion of mutually gratifying interactions tends to mitigate and counter the destructive consequences of contentious interactions.

### (3) Social Context

The social setting within which conflict groups contend with each other also greatly affects the adversaries' identities.

**Ways of thinking:** The prevailing ways of thinking in every period of history profoundly influences how people characterize themselves and each other. Identifications in terms of religious beliefs, class relations, ethnicity, or lifestyles are more or less striking in different times and places. For example, racist ways of thinking have been more pervasive in some eras than in others and class-consciousness has been more prevalent in European societies than in the United States.

**Self Determination:** Thus too, in an age sympathetic to nationalism, ethnic group members tend to claim the right of collective self-determination, and they find support for such claims from nonmembers. The collapse of the Soviet Union undermined the appeal of the secular and universalistic communist ideology, while the rapid changes of the modern world created new sources of discontents. Fundamentalist interpretations of the world in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism are in part responses to the resulting unsatisfied needs for meaning, community, and hope.

**Modeling:** The social context provides a repertoire of possible identities to assume. Identities that others have constructed and used to advance their interests serve as models, and similar identities then become attractive. Thus, in the United States, African Americans in the 1960s' civil rights struggle stressed their identity as blacks and served as models for other disadvantaged peoples.

**External Influences:** Moreover, some external actors (that is, people outside the identity group) actively promote particular interpretations of history, economic relations, or God. They promulgate their views and transform social relations, as has happened with secular and religious revolutions and social movements. They also influence everyone's sense of identity, if only in opposition to the spreading of new world-views.

### Changing Identities and Transforming Intractable Conflicts

Although many aspects of identity contribute to a conflict's intractability, there are also ways to modify identities so as to reduce the intractability of a conflict. In parallel with the preceding section, policies in three settings are discussed: (1) within each group, (2) in the relations between the groups, and (3) in their social context.

Policies vary in their appropriateness at different phases of conflict intractability. Six phases are particularly significant:

- conflict emergence,
- conflict escalation,
- failed peacemaking efforts,
- institutionalization of destructive conflict,
- de-escalation leading to transformation, and
- termination of the intractable character of the conflict.

These six phases are only loosely sequential, since some occur simultaneously and conflicts often return to an earlier phase. For each setting, one can identify policies that

- help prevent conflicts from becoming intractable;
- help stop the prolongation and escalation of intractable conflicts, and
- help transform and resolve intractable conflicts.

**Internal policies:** Policies that may help modify identities so as to reduce conflict intractability may be conducted by a great variety of persons within each adversary camp, differing in rank and in arena of activity.

**Preventive Policies:** All may be engaged in preventive policies, which help to prevent conflicts from becoming intractable. Within all communities and countries, being peaceful and loving is part of people's identities. Parents, schoolteachers, religious leaders, artists, entertainers, and many others can foster those qualities in their children, students, congregants, and audiences. Furthermore, school texts, films, and news reports can convey the humanity and perspectives of groups with whom conflicts have occurred.

**Interruptive Policies:** The modified conceptions of themselves and of other groups and peoples can support additional actions that reduce the likelihood of destructive conflicts arising. These actions may be initiatives to reduce grievances felt by adversaries or reciprocations of peaceful gestures by the other side. The growth of organized dissent from the uncompromising policies of the dominant leadership is also helpful in interrupting intractable conflicts. Rival leadership factions, middle-level leaders (e.g. community or organizational leaders), or grass roots organizations may undertake dissent, as sometimes occurs in peace movement mobilizations. The dissenters may appeal to aspects of the prevailing identity that pertain to relations within the group rather than antagonisms with outsiders.

**Transformational Policies:** Many other internal policies are relevant for the fundamental transformation of an intractable conflict. One approach is acting to change the ideologies and belief systems that sustain the conflict. For example, in 1986, the general synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, the major church of the Afrikaners of South Africa, resolved that the forced separation of peoples could not be considered a biblical imperative. The removal of religious support for apartheid contributed greatly to the negotiated end of the entire apartheid system in South Africa.

Much public and scholarly attention is now given to revealing the truth about past injustices and human rights violations in order to build a secure peace. Knowledge of past and ongoing oppression by people within the oppressor community or country can alter their self-identity. They may come to see themselves as being complicit in wrongly harming others. -- Once they accept that responsibility, they would be more likely to apologize and to offer some degree of compensation for past injuries. This has been the case for Germans after World War II, for example.

## Relations Between Adversaries

How adversaries interact with each other is particularly important in transforming collective identities and conceptions each adversary has about itself and about the other. Neither side in a conflict is hapless. Policies may be undertaken by either side to foster joint actions that prevent, interrupt, and transform intractable conflicts.

**Preventive Policies:** Many policies can help prevent intractable conflicts from emerging and becoming entrenched. For example, if one side is forthcoming about providing compensatory benefits for past injustices or providing assurances that past injustices will end, the other side tends to pursue limited and non-vindictive goals. There is a risk, however, that the compensations and assurances will be seen as signs of weakness, and the goals raised higher. Attribution theory suggests another possibility.[11] It holds that people tend to believe that members of their own group are good by nature, while members of another group act well only due to their circumstances. It follows that if those others have done some good deed, it is only because they were forced to do so and more coercion will yield even greater benefits. Negotiating shared understandings about conciliatory

moves can help reduce such misunderstandings.

The way each adversary resists oppression and injustice in turn affects that group's self-identity and conception of the other. For example, in the case of African-Americans and European-Americans in the 1950s and early 1960s, the nonviolent way the civil rights struggle was waged and the way the country as a whole responded affected both parties: it helped change the collective identities of both African and European Americans, increasing the civic character of American identity rather than its ethnic character. Furthermore, American identity went from being characterized as a melting pot within which "foreign" elements assimilated to an enduring multi-cultural society.

**Interruptive Policies:** Many other policies help interrupt or stop destructive escalation. These are policies that regulate strife and/or provide assurances that the vital interests of the other side will not be attacked. In many ways, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union became managed to limit the threat each posed the other. The arms control agreements helped channel and manage the arms race. The Helsinki Accords, signed in 1975, assured the Soviet Union that the borders established in Europe after World War II were inviolable, including the shift of Soviet borders westward and the division of Germany. Thus assured, the Soviet Union eased the barriers to Western influence.

**Transformative Policies:** Adversaries can act in ways that help transform the intractable conflict between them, by contributing to a fundamental transformation of one or both opponents. For example, during the Cold War, cultural, educational, and other social exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union were conducted at official and non-official levels. They contributed to changes in the way many members of the Soviet elites saw themselves and viewed Americans, and people on each side developed new perceptions of the other side. The changes in both identities and conceptions contributed to a transformation in the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.[12]

Other confidence-building measures between adversaries include agreements to inform each other of military maneuvers and establish mechanisms to be more transparent about actions that otherwise might seem threatening. Confidence-building measures tend to reduce denigrating views of the other side and reduce the inclination to characterize oneself in terms of opposition to the other side.

Reconciliatory actions are increasingly common in order to achieve peace. They may not only promote regard for the other side, but also transform the identity of those undertaking the actions. Taking such actions reduces the likelihood of holding onto sentiments that people sharing one's collective identity are superior to other peoples and more wholly human. Certainly, such reconciliatory actions reduce the grievances of those who previously suffered the indignities of low regard, increasing the likelihood of ending an intractable conflict.

Finally, the adversaries can pursue policies that support shared overarching identities. Thus, new institutional arrangements can better highlight broad identities, such as being European. In addition, an old identity may be modified to be more inclusive, as occurred in South Africa with its political transformation and as is occurring in the United States as its multicultural character is increasingly stressed.

## Social Context

Actors who are not members of the adversarial camps can carry out policies that help to prevent, interrupt, and end intractable conflicts; only a few strategies are briefly noted here.

**Preventive Policies:** Official and nonofficial agencies may help alleviate deteriorating living conditions that otherwise might exacerbate ethnic antagonisms and ignite fights that become intractable. This may include alerting people inside and outside the areas affected about the risks of pursuing conflicts destructively, further imperiling lives.

Outside actors can also foster norms and institutions that help develop nondestructive ways of handling the inevitable disputes of social life. A wide variety of organizations engage in training and consultations to support such methods. Indeed, the world climate may be more or less supportive of various methods of struggle, whether it be armed struggle, democratic elections, terrorism, or nonviolent resistance. Groups resorting to one of these methods may get assistance from particular allies or face external opposition for doing so.

**Interruptive Policies:** Once a conflict has already become protracted and destructive, intermediaries are particularly needed to stop further deterioration. Domestically, this is often recognized as a primary obligation of the central government, which tries to manage internal conflicts rather than exacerbate them as a party in the fight. Internationally, the U.N. and regional intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) increasingly undertake intermediary interventions. Outside intervention sometimes may even use force to stop violence, as done by U.N. peacekeeping or other multilateral forces.

External actors may also halt further deterioration by constraining one or both sides in a conflict. One such constraint is economic sanctions, directed to stop gross violations of human rights. Sanctions can affect the self-conceptions of some parties to an intractable conflict. The widespread condemnation of South African white minority's treatment of non-whites under apartheid contributed to changes in the way white South Africans saw themselves and their opponents.

**Transformative Policies:** Outside actors may also undertake a variety of mediating roles to help stop and even transform an intractable conflict. Mediation generally entails according some legitimacy to the antagonistic sides in a conflict and treating the representatives with human regard, even when the parties themselves do not. In such circumstances, participating in the mediation may prompt each side to modify its conception of the other and also of itself.

The social context also affects the long-term transformation of intractable conflicts and the establishment of enduring peaceful accommodations. External actors can be important agents in ensuring compliance to agreements, which helps build trust between former adversaries. Experiences providing grounds for mutual trust affect self-identities and also conceptions of the other side that help transform intractable conflicts.

External actors may also contribute resources that help fulfill the terms of agreements and overcome threats to the conflict's transformation and enduring resolution. The resources may include emergency food, assistance in rebuilding infrastructure, aid in training and education, and protection against violent acts by opponents of stability.[13]

## Conclusions

Identities can greatly contribute to conflict intractability. How adversaries think about who they are and who and what their enemies are profoundly influences the course of any conflict between them. Their sense of identity and conceptions of each other contribute to their conflict's destructive quality as well as to its long duration. Whether and how identities contribute to intractable conflicts depends on their particular qualities. Of course, identities alone do not determine a conflict's intractability; many other factors are discussed in many other essays in this web site. Identities can and do change in ways that help prevent, limit, and end intractable conflicts. These changes are brought about by groups within each adversary camp, by the way the adversaries interact, and by the conduct of persons and groups who intervene or otherwise affect the primary adversaries. In addition, adversaries are not unchanging, unitary groups; each has many kinds of members with their own interactions with each other and with persons and groups in and outside the adversary camps. All this complicates but also offers opportunities to avert, interrupt, and end intractable conflicts.

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**Use the following to cite this article:**

Kriesberg, Louis. "Identity Issues." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: July 2003  
<<http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/identity-issues>>.