Eight Assertions About Identity

IDENTITY

1. Human Beings are “hard wired” to be a pattern recognition species. Our ability to distinguish between objects, circumstances, and behavior is a functional cognitive process necessary for survival. Without patterns / categorizations life would be an un-navigable “buzz of confusion.”

2. This categorization impulse extends to the social realm. Universally human beings categorize among people by defining who is ‘like me’ (in-group) and who is ‘not like me’ (out-group).

IDENTITY AND CONFLICT

3. The categorization of people into in-groups and out-groups is a causal force in social conflict due to the following sequence of events:
   - Individuals have a desire to view themselves in a positive light, so they are motivated to view their in-groups positively and to maintain cooperative relationships with members of the in-group (*the in-group positivity principle*).
   - In-group positivity is enhanced by social comparison with out groups in which in-group attributes and outcomes are evaluated as better than or superior to those of out groups (*the intergroup comparison principle*).
   - The intergroup comparison principle becomes a motivation for stereotyping, mirror images, negative / positive attributions, dehumanization, and prejudice about the ‘other.’
   - Therefore, relationships between in-group and out groups are characterized by antagonism, conflict, and mutual contempt (*the out-group hostility principle*).

4. Identity conflicts are, perhaps, the most intractable kinds of conflicts because:
   - Identity is a basic and non-negotiable human need that cannot be suppressed
   - Violent conflict only reinforces identity, which leads to more conflict, which reinforces identity….

IDENTITY AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

5. Identities are not fixed; rather, they shift according to context. Indeed, *Social Identity Theory* suggests that those identities which are *most under threat* often emerge as primary to the self / group.

6. Since identities are not fixed, interaction with the ‘other’ is transformative and challenges pre-conceived notions of how people that are different from us are suppose to act.

7. Conflict management practitioners frequently use ‘contact theory’ as the basis for their work, believing that contact can rehumanize the other, at a minimum, and create super-ordinate identities that mitigate conflict in the best cases.

8. Troubling questions: In a world of multiple identity-based conflicts why do some emerge and others remain dormant? Why do some identity groups peacefully ‘participate’ in social systems where they have low-status? Under what conditions and context does ‘contact’ lead to transformation?