

Group Identity and Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict: An Introduction

Background Materials

This session introduces some tools for recognizing conflicting group identities and their points of contact. It opens a discussion of when and why differences in religion, ethnicity, culture, region, or socio-economic strata turn violent; and challenges participants to imagine assignments and exercises to prompt students to patiently work to understand competing identities in different countries studied in the K-12 classroom.

Key Concepts and Definitions

- Identity as a shared “moral framework” or “orientation towards the good” (Charles Taylor)
- The distinction between group ties, based around kinship or common origin, and grid connections, based around a shared acquired language or set of symbols (derived from Mary Douglas)
- How a group’s horizons and aspirations vary with its dominance
- The multiple levels of culture where group identities come into contact
- Using ethnic and sectarian ideal types as a basis for comparing real world group identities

Philosopher Charles Taylor proposes a notion of individual **identity**, or dignity, based on the “inescapable” “orientation” of each human self toward the good, within a “framework” of meaning that relates “three dimensions of our moral life”: first, fame, honor, the respect we command from others, and the duties we owe others; second, self-mastery or the transformation of the will; and third, self-expression or creativity. Individuals become oriented to the good as they learn to communicate. As a person acquires language skills and attains articulate personhood, he or she is expected to “answer for himself or herself,” to be able to state where he or she stands. Both the development of an orientation toward the good and the expression of it take place in communication with others. One’s identity can change in the course of a lifetime but only within the moral space maintained by one’s interactions with other people. — *Identity Matters*, 206, summarizing ideas found in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, especially Part One and Chapter 25.

Whether favorable or unfavorable, a **stereotype** is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category. ... The stereotype acts as both a justificatory device for categorical acceptance or rejection of a group, and as a screening or selective device to maintain simplicity in perception and in thinking. — Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 191ff.

An **ideal type** is grounded in particulars and is intended to illuminate further particulars. How does it do this? By simplifying, by exaggerating the logic of the pattern so that it can be more easily grasped, the way that a caricature exaggerates the memorable features of an individual’s face. Ideal types are pure; concrete social reality seldom is. ... Ideal types are a tool to help extend the insights of case analysis to other cases, and to allow the application of local knowledge in a new locale. Weber wrote that “[t]he ideal-typical concept will help to develop our skill in imputation in research ... it offers guidance to the construction of hypotheses. It is not a description of reality, but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description.” — *Identity Matters*, 211. Quote from: Thomas Burger, *Max Weber’s Theory of Concept Formation*, 120ff.

We start by recognizing that the terms “ethnic” and “sectarian” have pejorative connotations. The phrase “ethnic and sectarian conflict” implies that if those involved would only set aside their irrational attachments to their blood kin or fictive kin and simply discard divisive, marginal religious attitudes and adopt modern, live-and-let-live practices of tolerance, ethnic and religious violence would cease. If we define the phenomena in this way, we place ourselves outside it.

Instead, let us suppose that “**ethnic**” and “**sectarian**” define two ideal types of identity, two moral frameworks, two orientations toward good. As polar opposites, together they provide two points of perspective—neither in principle being better than the other—against which we can compare what we understand about the identities of groups that are at odds. It seems extremely unlikely that any actual human group exhibits all of the characteristics we will attribute to either extreme, but many if not all group identities can be described and compared by reference to these two ideal types.

— *Identity Matters*, 212.

Horizons and Respect Vary with Aspirations in Identity Groups

	Aspirations				
	Survival	Isolation/Ghetto (Negative Integration)	Integration	Dominance	Exclusivity (Ethnic Cleansing or Total Conversion)
Horizons (Limit of group's vision for itself)	Will we live to see tomorrow?	Our children will live to see a better day.	We're okay. We have our role in the world.	We are on top. Others exist to serve us.	We are the universe. Others are damned (or do not exist).
Respect (What the group wants from others)	Leave us alone.	Allow us to live in our own way.	Treat us just as well as anyone else.	Accept our ways as the norm.	Fear us (or join us).

Levels of Cultural Contact

Level of Cultural Contact	Examples
Manners (Spanish <i>educación</i>) or protocol Education (German <i>Bildung</i>)	Both Tibetans and Singapore Malays consider ethnic Chinese rude. Education and similar institutions (like armies). The Karen of Burma in the British Army and civil service and in missionary schools, and later in their own army and refugee camp schools. Monastic education in Tibet, Burma, and Thailand.
Art (visual, literary, drama, music, dance, etc.) Courtship, marriage, and divorce Family relationships, kinship	<i>Mein Kampf</i> , <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> , <i>Guernica</i> , samizdat, Singaporean theater. The bride in <i>Beowulf</i> , "mixed marriages" in general. The Senegalese officer who said, "If we kill them, we're killing our own brothers; therefore, we try to avoid as much violence as we can, although we know where all [the MFDC] bases are."
Adoption and fostering	Tibetan students in Chinese boarding schools. Karen nationalist San C. Po of Burma (educated in missionary schools and then by missionaries who fostered him in the US) wrote: "[T]he Karens . . . owe what progress and advancement they have made, to the missionaries whom they affectionately call their 'Mother' under the protection of the British government whom they rightly call their 'Father.'"
Care and relations of dependence (nursing)	Servants and nannies, teachers, doctors.
Exchange, consumption, and markets	Local stores and markets, catalogs, phone sales people. A counterpart to Islam in Pakistan.
Work, business, and labor markets	Collegiality, teamwork, hiring, unions, bosses, business associations, extortion, debt peonage, slavery—all the relationships of the workplace.
Face-to-face contact	Neighbors, bus riders, representatives, users of a well. Stereotypes flourish without this.
Friendship	Contact theory as explained by Pettigrew. The source of Hitler's complaint that every German knew one good Jew.
Social networks	The "grids" that bring groups together, or the "groups" within which different worldviews meet.
Sports	Olympics, city sports leagues. A soccer game may have triggered the Casamance conflict.
Religious ceremonies and practices	Praying together, using the same practices when apart. Falun Gong exercises—and Internet sites.
Bilingualism and symbol literacy	The ability to understand one's own language and that of another group and to translate between them, bridging the gap.
Sublimation and reification	Games can replace war. Striving for worldly success, fueled by longing for salvation, may displace that longing. Symbolic conflict can take the place of physical violence or lead to it. Sacrifices. Scapegoats.

Two Ideal Types of Group Identity

	Ethnic	Sectarian
Looks toward	Past, common history, homeland	Future, utopia, afterlife, sacred sites
Scope	Particular (Immanent ontology)	Universal (Transcendent ontology)
Social organization	Clan, caste, class, vassalage	Egalitarian or absolute monarchy: “Equal before God”
Internal ties	Blood kin (membership is involuntary)	Fictive kinship (membership is voluntary or mutable)
Style	Defensive, oppositional, closed to outsiders	Creative, inclusive, open to outsiders
Relations with outsiders	Trade, conquest, intermarriage	Conversion, exclusion, symbolic separation
Language	Particular to group	Universal (sacred language of clerics or scripture)
Time and Time frame	Circle (cyclical): Generations, eternal	Arrow (progress): Individual lifetime, millenarian
Social obligations	Dependency, duty, obligation	Independence, freedom, free will
Broadest aspiration	Nation, nation-state, master race	Established religion, beliefs and practice universally shared
Corruption means	Disloyalty, abandonment	Lack of principle, venality
Social emotions and the status of women	Honor and shame. Women bear the tribe’s shame, which must be protected. Shame can only be lost, never recovered. Male honor rests on the foundation of female shame and cannot replace it.	Guilt, repentance, and grace. All are equally guilty; all may receive grace. Women are potentially equal to men. Any hierarchy is justified only insofar as it carries out the will of the deity.
Triggers for conflict	Violate boundaries. Symbolic triggers may be buried in history. Classic trigger: rape.	Disrupt practices. Triggers evident in doctrine. Classic trigger: defilement.
Healing from trauma	Complex. Like the violated boundaries, the keys to healing are found in the group’s unconscious, that is, in its history. Rape (the classic trigger) cannot be undone.	Straightforward. Reinstitute the practice. Rituals provide for healing. Defilement (the classic trigger) can be healed through grace, blessing, divine intervention. This is an ordinary function of religion.
Resources for conflict	Limited to the group and its allies	Potentially unlimited. Can gain new converts.
Resources in defeat	Memory. The group can survive in history until memory fades. Defeat can be total.	Belief and practice. Because the group’s mission is blessed, defeat is impossible and unimaginable.
Resources for compromise	Numerous, because the group seeks particular goals. Cannot compromise “blood and soil.”	Few. Group may make limited claims on the material world, but any compromise in its practices may cause a schism over purity.

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