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## **Disarming Weaponized Identities: Limitations and Opportunities**

'...while identity politics can certainly be mobilized very powerfully in the cause of violence, that violence can also be effectively resisted through a broader understanding of the richness of human identities' (Sen 2008: 14).

'If identity is constructed, then it may also be possible to deconstruct and challenge it' (Orjuela 2008: 51).

'...if we desire to live in a peaceful and just society, we can construct our identities in a way that is conducive to so doing' (Slocum-Bradley 2008: 220).

### **The Promise of Identity**

For a subset of conflict scholars, a new world of possibilities awaits us if we can understand and engage with a critical root cause of strife—identity. The above statements from Amartya Sen, Camilla Orjuela and Nikki Slocum-Bradley are cases in point. For Sen, although identities are often seen as tools for creating conflict, the cultural richness that they embody can also be used in order to steer people away from violence. For Orjuela, it is a matter of understanding that identities are themselves projects built by people; this realization reveals the potential for us to be able to modify and even reverse their destructive power. And for Slocum-Bradley, identities are not just potential bearers of conflict, but can be crafted into the ideal image of the just and peaceful societies we presumably all desire, and help propel that version of ourselves into being. Collectively, the work of such scholars advances the notion that an in-depth understanding and effective engagement with identities can provide a key way to prevent and counter violence and promote peace and cohesion.

Scholarly findings such as these suggest that identity offers great promise in addressing division and violence. Yet it is interesting to note that a good deal of the literature that supports this promise of identity is based on the somewhat contradictory insight that identity is used to forge not peace and cohesion, but division, conflict and violence. Across many contexts, divisive actors (opportunistic elites, violent extremists, etc.) are shown to utilize a range of identity-related components (e.g., cultural and historical narratives, conceptual imagery, etc.) to orchestrate shifts in the minds of individuals that motivate violence. As such processes are observed, the fact that identity can be used to foment violence is revealed to be powerful reasoning for the opposite assertion: that if people can use identity to divide, then

## *Disarming Weaponized Identities - Limitations and Opportunities*

the very same identity dynamics could be harnessed for the cause of resisting, preventing or even reversing such incitements to violence, and, going even further, for the promotion of peace and cohesion in its own right (c.f. Gartzke & Gleditsch 2006: 54; Orjuela 2008: 51-56; Rothman & Olson 2001: 296; Plessis 2001; Slocum-Bradley 2008; Zartman 2010).

This ability to see identity as a tool to generate conflict *and* as a tool for peacebuilding has provided a critical insight in the subfield of identity and conflict studies. In many ways, it is at the heart of identity's promising potential. The insight has also helped to promote further the notion that human beings are not the unwitting victims of their own sociobiological programming. By demonstrating the processes through which conflict or cohesion is created by human beings, 'primordialist' views that trumpet theories of native tribal aggression, or inevitable 'clashes of civilization' are debunked. Further, these insights counter an understanding of identity as innate and fixed, and make clear that identity is fluid and under constant construction, responding to, and shaped by, social and political forces (Chandra 2001).

As Jenkins points out, 'identity and ethnicity do not, *sui generis*, cause people to do things' (2000: 1); rather, it is a deliberate and conscious manipulation of identity mechanisms by other human beings that is the root cause of much violent and divisive human behaviour. Examples are as plentiful as conflicts themselves. In the five-year-long conflict between 1982 and 1987 in Matabeleland in Zimbabwe, for instance, political leaders reworked local identities to advance political objectives (Alexander et al. 2000), a tactic that was also used leading up to the genocides in Rwanda (Hintjens 2001) and Kosovo (Duijzings 2000) and in Germany during Hitler's rise to power (Bar-Tal 2016). Indeed, the majority of ethno-political violence in the twentieth century can be seen as the result of identity manipulation by political agents where differences were manufactured or emphasized in order to instigate division and violence (Chirof 1998). Beyond collective ethno-political violence, the same identity manipulation techniques are also adopted in countless terrorist recruitment efforts (Wiktorowicz 2004; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010; Sageman 2009; Borum 2011; Koehler 2014).

The fact that the world's most destructive conflicts and insidious extremism can be shown to be the result of the deliberate human manipulation of identity is, for scholars in the identity and conflict field at least, an unexpected cause for optimism moving forward. Again, this is largely because if we are dealing with social and psychological manipulations and constructions of human identities, then surely, as Slocum-Bradley reminds us, we can 'construct more consciously to sustain norms that promote the ends we profess to desire' (2010: 81). In understanding how to construct a positive approach—how to turn identity dynamics into peacemaking and cohesion building tools—scholars have naturally sought to understand the techniques and processes through which identities are used to harm and destroy. If the formula of negative manipulation can be understood, the logic goes, it can perhaps be countered or reversed, moving towards transforming conflict and promoting peace and cohesion.

## **Identity Weaponization**

Despite the wide variety of studies and observations on the subject, no single term is used in the literature to describe the universal psychological and social process or practice of manipulating identity in order to cause harm. We therefore begin by defining such a term. We build specifically on Hintjens' analogy of identity being used as a *knife* (Hintjens 2001)—fashioned as an instrument to divide and destroy communities once joined—to characterize this divisive use of identity as “weaponization.” Beyond this term highlighting the use of identity as a weapon, we intend it to emphasize the *processes* through which identity is transformed for the explicit purpose of harming the social and physical integrity of human individuals and communities. As these processes utilize the human mind and behaviour, identity weaponization as we define it here has parallels to the oft-used term ‘psychological warfare’ (e.g. Woodward 1995: 228). However, while psychological warfare is often used to describe a category of, or approach towards, fomenting conflict, the weaponization of identity highlights the *ways in which* psychosocial division is designed and operationalized.

We examine some of these processes below, paying particular attention to the manipulation of sociocultural concepts and referents—or narratives and their components—used to achieve the desired state of psychosocial division. We will show how identity weaponization moves beyond merely employing such processes to accomplish psychosocial division; it operates under the expectation of doing actual physical harm, or perhaps more precisely: the expectation that psychosocial divisions will become manifest in the physical world through harmful acts. Lastly, weaponization as we describe it here sets out to highlight the notion that identities are not necessarily predisposed to be entities that divide nor cause harm (i.e., they do not *have* to be weaponized), and indeed might become subject to other processes that have alternative end goals. These processes might include ‘harmonization’ (where they function to build peace and cohesion), ‘immunization’ (where they develop protection against weaponization or other processes), and ‘de-weaponization’ or ‘disarmament’ (where weaponization trajectories are reversed or previously weaponized identities are rendered inoperable).

## **The Techniques of Identity Weaponization**

Evidence for the destructive power of weaponized identities is extensive. This power is perhaps most tragically demonstrated through the many cases where communities that became entrenched in conflict previously enjoyed extended periods of peace and shared extensive cultural, linguistic, economic, political and religious characteristics. Examples include Albanians and Serbians in Kosovo (Seul 1999: 565), Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda (Hintjens 2001) and Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka (Tambiah 1986). Indeed, in many such cases we see that by ‘manipulating the identity concepts of those often unaware, people have fomented hatred and instigated violence, including ‘genocide’, against people who were previously

neighbours, friends and even relatives living together in peace' (Slocum-Bradley 2008: 1; c.f. Waller 2016: 181).

In attempting to understand the processes and techniques through which identities are transformed into weapons which achieve this kind of division and destruction, it is important to explore how identity plays a key role in defining the psychological, social and cultural dimensions of human life. Fundamentally, identity can be seen to be a conduit that links the 'self' to 'society' and the society to the self. For example, as an individual gains a sense of their own personal existence, they articulate their sense of self through a discursive inter-referencing of personal and cultural concepts, images and narratives (Slocum-Bradley 2009). Through this process, the very notions of who we are become embedded in a relative positioning of ourselves with and against particular cultural representations such as political, ethnic, historical images and narratives (Gregg 1998). As well as shaping selves, therefore, this self-society link can also shape society as it is, 'through the individual identity formation process that the narratives of a given social order [...] are either reproduced or repudiated' (Hammack 2008: 224).

Building on the notion of identity as a conduit that links self to society, identity has also been referred to as a *self-representation system* by personality psychologists (c.f. Gregg 1998). Seeing identity as a system of self-representation helps to highlight the self's search for ways to consolidate and connect psychological self-concepts to cultural concepts that can contain and articulate the self (and vice versa). As well as highlighting the psychological-cultural dimensions of human life, such a focus also helps to make sense of the ways in which individuals might seek to express and position themselves in a variety of *social* contexts, for instance in the way that particular self/culture representations are used in interactions in order to achieve specific goals such as the display of authority or fairness (Machin & Carrithers 1996). Understanding identity as a self-representation system that connects and defines psychological, social and cultural dimensions of human life<sup>1</sup> provides a particularly appropriate lens for the analysis of weaponization techniques and processes (see also Hammack 2008).

Indeed, we can see that weaponization exploits the connections between these dimensions, exploiting the fact that cultural information facilitates self-representation—providing the self with a key interface and feedback loop with the 'outside' world of people and images. By manipulating the cultural concepts, narratives and images to which an individual has access, a

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to these dynamics, integrating a neurobiological focus is also highly relevant. Quinn, 2006, referencing LeDoux (2002) identifies six neurological processes that comprise the self: parallel neural input, synaptic plasticity, coordination by modulators, neural self-assembly in convergence zones, downward causation, and emotional arousal. Quinn associates convergence zones and downward causation to self-representation. The fact that self's systems tend to 'press in their different ways toward integration' (Quinn 2006: 371) may be a critical factor in the ability of identity weaponization to affect the individual so profoundly. Under a state of weaponization, additional neurological processes (such as emotional arousal) will be triggered. If weaponization only needs to be successful in affecting one neural system in order to gain access to influence the 'shared culture' (Quinn 2006: 369; quoting LeDoux, 2002) of the neurobiological environment, then this would demonstrate a significant structural neurobiological vulnerability in addition to the psychological and social.

## *Disarming Weaponized Identities - Limitations and Opportunities*

manipulator can potentially affect an individual's psychological state and the resulting social interactions and relationships (c.f. Bourdieu 2003; Galtung 1990; Lukes 2004; Rothbart 2019; Kriesberg 2003). To restate this: by manipulating *cultural* information (e.g., discourse, narratives, concepts and images), and delivering this information in a way that can be readily absorbed into the mind of the target individual, a manipulator can effectively utilize identity's self-society conduit properties<sup>2</sup> to deliver messages designed to influence the *psychological state* and *social relationships* of that individual. This Trojan-horse ability to reach and gain control over the psychosocial environments of individuals through manipulations of commonly available cultural concepts and narratives may also help to explain how weaponization can affect many thousands of people simultaneously through strategies like mass propaganda which target large populations (many individuals who understand the same cultural information).

Bar-Tal, perhaps the most prolific scholar on the role of narrative in conflict, insists that violent conflict would not be possible without collective narrative manipulation (2016). Indeed, as he explains, 'narratives are powerful sociopsychological tools that provide prisms through which reality is viewed; that serve as foundations for socializing new generations; and that guide policies, actions, and practices of societies involved in intractable conflict' (Bar-Tal et al. 2014: 671-672). According to Bar-Tal, narratives become subject to very specific iterations when they become 'conflict-supporting.' Scaffolding upon the expression of a variety of human needs, including the need for meaning, security, a positive image of the collective self and the need for justice (Bar-Tal 2016), conflict-supporting narratives exploit internal fear and insecurity through targeting the (external) cultural expressions of what that fear looks like represented on the canvas of culture (c.f. Hammack 2008; Gregg 1998).

By exploiting the very nature of identity as the primary link between self and society to reach an inner set of core needs-based 'emergency triggers', weaponizers can effectively become powerful directors of an individual's state of mind and, in turn, their resulting behaviours and actions. This ability to reach and influence and capture the inner world of the self through manipulating the outer world of the cultural narratives and discourses that represent that self in the world, is, fortunately, not an easy one to acquire. Human social, cultural and psychological environments have multiple safeguards, such as cultural norms, moral codes and loyalties, and the importance of maintaining intimate human relationships. To overcome such safeguards, weaponizers must set about employing techniques that exploit key vulnerabilities across these environments. We will briefly explore three ways in which weaponization approaches its task of cultural/narrative manipulation and how blending and compounding these techniques increases the weaponizer's chances of success. We will explore (1) the construction of intergroup cultural difference, (2) the construction of intra-group cultural exclusivity, and (3) the removal of narrative optionality.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Hammack's (2006) related observations on the relationship between personal and master narratives as expressing this personality/culture link. See Gregg (1998) for a short summary of how self-society linkages of this kind were observed in the anthropological culture/personality school of the mid-twentieth century.

## **1. The Construction of Inter-Group Cultural Difference**

Perhaps predictably for a process which demonstrates such transformative and destructive power, case studies on identity and conflict reveal the way in which weaponization involves *active and sustained efforts to divide human populations through the invention, reinvention and construction of cultural difference*. We use the term 'cultural' here to refer to all learned information that references who a group is ethnically, their historical narratives, beliefs, values and practices. That the construction of cultural difference is a weaponization technique may seem an obvious observation, but it is important to reflect on the fact that in many conflicts, observers point to *preexisting animosities* between cultural groups as the cause of conflict and violence. In actuality, blaming ethnic, religious and other cultural differences for the onset or continuation of conflict is often part of the very manipulation which those who are engaged in attempting to divide the population are mobilizing.

For instance, in both Rwanda and Sri Lanka, the deliberate construction of difference across ethnic/racial representations has been seen to be the primary cause of subsequent violent conflict, an insight that strongly contradicts the notion that the violence was caused by a pre-existing state of antagonism between ethnic communities (Orjuela 2008: 5). In Sri Lanka specifically, from framing economic concerns in terms of ethnic identities (Perera 1992) to the intensive politicization of identity along ethno-nationalist lines in order to mobilize support for their agendas, Sinhalese and Tamil political leaders actively constructed differences between communities, ultimately creating powerful exclusive identities that in turn supported and propelled the war (Horowitz 1985; 1998; Perera 1992). Countless examples also exist across extremist movements where the construction of cultural difference might be particularly frenetic and therefore visible. Demonstrating how cultural difference is constructed through a concerted 'filling out' of defining in-group vs. out-group 'identity narratives', Berger (2018) discusses how the white nationalist movement Christian Identity constructs 'white' vs. 'other' racial categories in polar opposition, and how such definitions have morphed over time from their origins in 19th century concepts that set out quite different parameters of cultural difference.

Indeed, the fact that weaponization involves sustained human agency focused on the construction of cultural difference means that in any given context, weaponization may be occurring on a cultural landscape already somewhat transformed by previous successful, or partially successful, attempts to weaponize identities (or otherwise transform them for the purpose of creating division). This layering of periods of identity manipulation and division can also add to the illusion that 'genuine', 'historical', ethnic/cultural differences are fueling the conflict. Rwanda is an obvious example, where we see that efforts to weaponize identities in the 1990s were layered upon a previously successful period of cultural division in the colonial period, during which time Hutu and Tutsi tribal affiliations were racialized. As Hintjens notes, 'in Rwanda such identities became more rigidly defined and less complex with modernity; the boundaries of ethnic and 'racial' identity started to harden with German colonial rule' and colonial reforms 'all undermined the flexibility of social identities in Rwanda' (2001: 49). Such

historical contexts can be and are used to produce the illusion of a normative reality defined by preexisting differences. As such, building upon the divisions established in the previous era or phase can significantly enhance the power of contemporary weaponization efforts.

Beyond what may be an intelligent use of layered historical division, the construction of in-group versus out-group cultural difference through narrative manipulation need not be sophisticated. At its core is an effort to define the in-group in positive terms and define the outgroup in negative terms (c.f. Berger 2018). There is often a focus on the manufacture and/or promotion of master narratives that label the out-group Other as fundamentally different in terms of who they are as cultural beings (i.e., through narratives describing exotic/primitive/evil/absurd belief systems, practices and traits), and/or where they come from (i.e., through narratives which detail geographical, biological, mythical origins that are quite distinct from the in-group). Such narratives, 'use a general homogenized, undifferentiated, de-individualized, and delegitimize category of the rival group' (Bar-Tal in press). This renders the Other in abstract terms, thus providing the critical distance between the out-group and the in-group that serves as a basis for further weaponization processes.

## **2. The Construction of Intra-Group Cultural Exclusivity**

The sustained social construction of cultural difference can be a powerful component of the weaponization process, particularly, as we have noted, if it is able to leverage past divisions forged by historical efforts to divide. It does face a key challenge, however: it has to deal with members of the population who are not particularly convinced by the divisive attempts and/or who see themselves existing within a narrative substructure that promotes connections to the Other and perhaps integrates the Other into the membership of the in-group. The power of weaponization to mobilize populations towards violence is significantly increased, therefore, if the nature of in-group membership can be redefined and rearticulated along culturally exclusivist lines. The construction of resonant discourse that (re)narrates what it means to be a member of the in-group through essentialized and unique cultural traits, practices and beliefs is a powerful tool in this endeavour.

This technique is widespread, but is perhaps most easily observed in examples of extremist movements. As Berger explains,

Extremist ideologies define constrictive or exclusive identities and enforce rigid boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. Ironically, this quest to create greater group cohesion can itself fracture the in-group... (putting) pressure on members of the in-group to adopt more hostile attitudes toward the out-group. When this happens, the unity of the in-group comes under pressure (Berger 2018: 61-62).

This kind of pressure--where the extremist in-group attempts a domination of the other in-groups and channels membership boundaries successfully until the majority of in-groups are united in exclusivity—is seen in a wide variety of ethnic conflicts. In pre-genocide Rwanda, for

example, it might have been perfectly acceptable to transcend Hutu or Tutsi ethnic markers (for instance in ethnically-mixed marriage unions). This non-exclusivist (non racialized) stance on what it meant to be Rwandan as a whole was a perfectly legitimate position to take. In the period leading up to the genocide, however, such non-exclusivist voices were silenced, and 'non-ethnic forms of individual and collective self-expression were not tolerated' (Hintjens & Kiwuwa 2006: 46).

Shifting an individual's affiliations from group to group (even between in-groups within the same cultural environment) is not an easy task—social sanctions are well-developed that define the boundaries of group memberships and prevent defections (c.f. Tajfel & Turner 1979). Using the previously observed technique of *constructing intergroup cultural difference*, narratives that stress the preservation of the in-group in the face of outside threats to in-group security, self-image, and/or need for just retributions etc. are employed in order to help achieve these shifts. It is noteworthy that while the *construction of cultural difference* attempts to create cultural distance and separation, the *construction of intra-group cultural exclusivity* is a process that attempts a conflation and unification of diverse self/cultural signifiers and representations. Indeed, while this technique *constructs sameness*, it is also important to note that in order to achieve this, narrative options must be stripped away in order to channel individuals into exclusivist expressions. This brings us to the third technique of identity weaponization.

### **3. The Removal of Narrative Optionality, Diversity, and Interconnectedness**

As we have noted, when attempting to construct sameness or difference, weaponizers must set out to redefine and renarrate the boundaries of self and other cultural definitions and expressions. As such, the ability to construct cultural sameness and difference effectively goes beyond merely the production of narrative *per se*, relying on a third technique—the ability to organize, filter and reassociate existing narrative discourse components (cultural concepts, symbols and images) in the cultural environment. More specifically, successful weaponization efforts will set out to impact the individual's ability to access a wide range of cultural referents when generating identity. Indeed, through the isolation, reinterpretation, reassociation and/or the removal of cultural concepts, images and symbols from the networks of cultural referents that comprise the totality of available cultural narrative discourse, this weaponization technique progressively forces individuals into singular and exclusive states.

*The removal of narrative optionality, diversity, and interconnectedness* is thus focused on diminishing what Sen terms the 'cultural richness' of our societies. Sen (2006) expresses this as a move from multiplicity to singularity, seeing that 'in our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups—we belong to all of them. The same person can be, without any contradiction, a Norwegian citizen, of Asian origin, with Bangladeshi ancestry, a Muslim, a socialist, a woman, a vegetarian, a jazz musician, a doctor, a poet, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights' (2006: 6-7). So, the removal of the ability to identify with a variety of cultural groupings at once, instead channelling the importance of, for instance, ethnic

or religious membership as the vital thing about us, is a powerful feature of identity weaponization. This technique of *removing narrative optionality* can also be seen as a process of symbolic choice reduction or *depluralization* (Koehler 2015).

Michael Mousseau (2011), in trying to understand the rise of extremist identities in the Middle East, illustrates this process well. Mousseau observes that in regions where militant Islamist groups have developed, various nationalist, socialist, and secular ideologies and images were rendered inaccessible through a political discourse that targeted their removal. In this case, political groups espousing a particularly violent form of militant Islam established an opposition between themselves and other in-groups by way of cutting off the potential symbols available. These symbols might represent cosmopolitanism or secular ideologies, and cutting them off resulted in particularly narrow constructions of identity which excluded the possibility of sharing the same aspects of moderate Islamic identities with other in-group members.<sup>3</sup>

When effectively deployed, this technique is perhaps particularly disruptive of the ordinary psychological and social functioning that characterizes non-weaponized cultural environments. For example, a variety of psychological evidence points to the importance of fluid and multiple identity options. Thoits (2003), for instance, speaks about the fact that psychological well-being is derived from being able to choose from a variety of psychosocial linkages and expressions and performance roles. Where individuals are not permitted their full range of self-expression, identities become conflated and social interactions and roles constricted in a variety of ways. In addition to the potential damage to social relationships, mental health and well-being, such restrictions may create the conditions for individuals to become subject to increased manipulation by groups or political leaders, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of increasing vulnerability and exploitation.

Seen in a non- or pre- weaponization context, the diversity and interlinkedness of cultural concepts and the associated narrative optionality that individuals have access to—that cultural richness—is a safeguard that can help to prevent sporadic or unsophisticated attempts to divide human populations. As Sen explains: ‘...an understanding of the multiplicity of our identities can be a huge force in combating the instigation of violence based on a singular identity...’ (Sen 2008: 11). By way of contrast, successfully damaging the integrity of this symbolic network can represent one of weaponization’s most powerful techniques: ‘...reductionist cultivation of singular identities has indeed been responsible for a good deal of what can be called ‘engineered bloodshed’ across the world’ (Sen 2008: 7). Given this observation, it is perhaps unsurprising there are striking similarities between cases where the deppluralization or singularization of identity is observed to be in force as a technique, and the onset of violence (Sen 2006; Hintjens, 2001).

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Seul highlights another case in point in the former Yugoslavia (Seul, J. 1999: 565).

## **Disarming and Preventing Identity Weaponization**

Understanding some of the processes through which weaponization gains access to, and control of, an individual's psychosocial mechanisms and processes helps us to understand to what extent current efforts to prevent, counter and reverse its effects are effective, and how the design of future counter and/or prevention/reversal strategies might be best directed. For example, understanding that weaponization must work to construct cultural difference, an obvious counter-weaponization technique is to do the opposite: construct narratives of cultural sameness, or what groups share. Indeed, social scientists working in peace and conflict have pointed to the fact that a shared sense of identity has the potential to reduce the perception of threats which can lead to conflict (Wendt 1999; Kant 1971; Rousseau 2002; Sen 2006). Similar insights are also prevalent in counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization scholarship (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010; Wiktorowicz 2004). Likewise, if narratives which emphasize shared cultural traits can be resonant and powerful enough, they may even provide a counterbalance that could eventually work to displace the divisive narrative manipulation. As Bar-Tal points out: 'one of the core elements in the process of peacebuilding is weakening the adherence of the rivals to the conflict-supporting narratives and introducing new ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that eventually develop into new peace-supporting narratives' (2014: 669-670).

As an example, Orjuela (2008) highlights how such conflict-supporting vs. peace-supporting narrative struggles played out during the Sri Lankan civil war, where, even as identity weaponization was being used to motivate violence, the mobilization of inclusive and shared narratives had been at the centre of peace-building strategies within the country. In post-conflict Sri Lanka, peace workers have primarily focused on transcending identity-based boundaries, and peace activities often aim to bridge ethnic divides by highlighting shared values and promoting cultural exchange. While peace workers have focused on the aspects of identities that are shared, they have also worked to create alternative identities, based on shared experience as activists, artists, women, or victims of war (Orjuela 2008: 200-212). The creation of alternative identities, albeit post-genocide, was also a recommendation following reflection on how radio propaganda in Rwanda was able to take hold of the minds of so many without resonant inclusive narrative competition (Rothbart & Bartlett 2008).

The notion that by protecting, regenerating and promoting inclusive narratives, we can prevent and counter exclusive identities and contribute to conflict resolution/transformation is a powerful one, shared by researchers in the field of identity and conflict (Coy & Woehrle 2000: 14; King 2014: 29; Gaertner et al. 1989; Waller 2016: 192). As in the above example, one approach to accomplish this has been to focus on the amplification of common socio-cultural features and representations in order to make them more explicitly shared and therefore less vulnerable to compressive or depluralizing manipulation. The 'common in-group identity model' is one such approach, setting out to develop a single inclusive superordinate identity in order to counter exclusive identities (Gaertner et al. 1989; Gaertner et al. 1993; Cuhadar & Dayton 2011: 278), and some strategies to combat terrorism have relied on a similar strategy (Schwartz et al. 2009, see also Silverman 2016; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2016).

## *Disarming Weaponized Identities - Limitations and Opportunities*

Counter or alternative narrative construction and promotion techniques are part of a process we might term *weaponized identity disarmament*. These techniques attempt to engage directly the brute force divisive attacks through the force of (ideally) *equally or more powerful* inclusive narratives. As well as their potential power to render ineffective weaponization processes that are already underway, such techniques may also allow for weaponization *prevention* strategies to be developed. As noted above, Rothbart and Bartlett (2008), for instance, point out that if alternative narratives that ‘draw on (and counterbalance) prevailing myths and narratives’ (2008: 245) had been actively constructed and promoted *before* divisive propaganda took hold in Rwanda, weaponization could have been impeded or prevented.

While there is clearly great scope for constructing counter or alternative narratives, straightforward opposition to weaponizer constructions may not be the most effective disarmament strategy. One reason for this is that such techniques tend to focus on the narrative content of the weaponizer manipulations rather than attempt to engage with the cultural environment as a dynamic and changing system. As we have seen, weaponization is highly disruptive and can result in substantially altered cultural environments in short periods of time. Merely trumpeting counter narratives on top of this changing environment runs the risk of a backlash to the counter narratives, or simply a lack of effectiveness, since such reversals lack resonance with the intended audiences. In the worst case scenario, counter narratives might even unintentionally strengthen divisive ones by engaging with their frame and discourse and empowering weaponizers to craft rebuttals that bolster and further promote their messaging (Altman 2019).

In attempting to combat the broad-spectrum of weaponization impacts, we need to gain a dynamic picture of which narrative components are being manipulated/removed and how the removal or reassociations are taking place. Positioning theory goes some way to attempting to provide a solution here, describing how individuals and groups take ‘positions’, and are positioned by others, through the use of cultural narratives or ‘storylines’ which, in turn, compel them to certain actions (e.g. violence) (Moghaddam & Harré 2010: 2). By gaining a relative picture of what narrative/concept keys weaponizers are using, shifts in cultural discourses, or the transferring of concepts from one field of discourse to another can be revealed, or even simulated, in order to model certain types of relationship between narratives (storylines) and actions. This knowledge could have considerable implications for identities in conflict (Moghaddam et al. 2008).

While positioning theory provides a dynamic analytical model, any such model will be limited by the quality and relevance of the available data. In an identity weaponization context, a high resolution picture of a given cultural/symbolic environment, with all the complexity of its narrative/concept networks and functioning, is required. Such data can be challenging to gather and ideally involves a specialized blend of interdisciplinary research tools and techniques. Hammack (2008), for instance, argues for a combination of discourse analysis and an ethnographic perspective which focuses on the interface between personal narratives (self) and how they are couched in cultural or master narratives (and vice versa). By combining

## *Disarming Weaponized Identities - Limitations and Opportunities*

research techniques such as these to gain a detailed understanding of a cultural landscape, while using a dynamic model (e.g. positioning theory) to interpret it, we may be able to reveal the core patterns within any identity manipulation process. More profoundly, if we can understand precisely which cultural narratives and discursive components are being targeted, and model the effects of the manipulations, we can begin to build weaponized identity disarmament strategies which are able to systematically counter the divisive process in dynamic, resonant and effective ways.

### **Weaponized Identity Disarmament and Prevention: Opportunities and Limitations**

As we have seen, the very same properties that make identities vulnerable to weaponization may be utilized in order to prevent, impede and even reverse the processes through which weaponization takes hold and operates, potentially shifting the role of identities as weapons into the 'building blocks of sustainable peace' (Hagg & Kagwanja 2008: 9). As Rothman and Olson point out, 'usually the identities forged in the crucible of conflict are exclusive and adversarial. [Yet] they can also be a source for identity formation which is inclusive' (2001: 296). Indeed, we have seen how, in various ways, identity weaponization can be countered through a process of displacement of divisive narratives by inclusive ones, which we have termed *weaponized identity disarmament*. We might also see that setting up a powerful and resonant set of inclusive narratives may help in the *prevention of identity weaponization*, a process we might also refer to as *immunization* in that it sets out to provide the conditions within which it is impossible for weaponization to operate effectively.

Attempts to apply an understanding of core identity weaponization dynamics to the building of models which can theoretically affect the arrangement of cultural symbolism indeed seem to have potential. The astute or sector-experienced reader may have surmised, however, that the solutions, while promising, do not quite match up to the heavily sophisticated and often coordinated approach taken by weaponization itself, nor are they necessarily readily available for use by practitioners. We might logically ask: why are systematic methodologies which focus on known dynamics of self-representation and cultural narrative manipulation, often missing from the conflict transformation field and its related sectors? Why does the promised potential of identity weaponization prevention/disarmament remain somewhat unfulfilled beyond the salience and integrity of the core theoretical insights of the conflict and identity subfield? And, lastly, to take this question to its ultimate end: if we can truly choose the identities we want to live within, as some scholars suggest, why does identity-based conflict and violence continue even to exist at all? In the remainder of this paper, we explore three possible answers and propose some ways forward.

### **Theoretical Dis-integration**

Academics and practitioners from a variety of disciplines have been working for some time to understand and model workings of identity in order to develop tools which might aid in the

prevention of conflict and the promotion of peace and cohesion. Thus far in this paper, we have outlined a framework for defining and modelling some key features of identity as it plays a role in conflict and peace building. In doing so, we have needed to draw on a wide range of literature to advance the notion of Identity Weaponization and its key techniques. Even our relatively narrow focus on the dynamics of division and cohesion has required referencing perspectives and models from across social psychology, anthropology, political science, neuroscience, economics and international relations. In doing so, it becomes clear that each discipline has its own conceptions of what identity is, as well as specific models and jargon to articulate its conceptions. On the positive side, such a wealth of perspectives presents great choice and variety, potentially offering a huge number of useful perspectives. On the negative side, this disciplinary specificity creates significant challenges of integration and application (Burke 2003: 1; Vignoles et al. 2011: 7).

Those working on cross-disciplinary perspectives of identity acknowledge that, 'essentially, to study the processes discovered in one approach without incorporating the processes identified in the other approach provides only a partial understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics that we need to address in developing good science on [identity]' (Stets & Serpe 2016: 4). While former theorists have left us with a rich set of ideas, there is broad recognition that contemporary theories of identity are incomplete (Kaufman 2006: 46; c.f. Vignoles et al. 2011: 12), and no single approach, on its own, can fully explain every scenario. Some scholars have attempted to pull together various strands of contemporary theory on identity in order to create a more nuanced approach (e.g. Stryker & Burke 2000; Owens et al. 2010; Côté 2006; Hitlin 2003; Brewer 2001). No matter how effectively this is done, however, it seems impossible to do justice to the sheer plethora of theories which have been developed to explain identity (Stets & Serpe 2016). Brubaker and Cooper argue that the proliferation of research on identity, and the lack of integration within the academic community has led to an overproduction and devaluation of perspectives on identity, leaving us with a 'crisis' in identity theory (2000: 4; c.f. Côté 2006: 6). Brewer describes a 'conceptual anarchy' (2001: 116). The proliferation has prompted Côté to proclaim that 'there is an urgent need to develop a common taxonomy that attends to the multidimensionality represented by the various approaches sharing the term 'identity', lest we forfeit the progress we have gained so far' (2006: 4).

Given the relevance of identity to conflict and peace building, perhaps in no other sector is the development of such a common taxonomy and integration so critical. Indeed, it may be the case that scientific discoveries vital to assisting conflict transformation are being obscured by compartmentalized descriptions of identity dynamics. For instance, while it is well established that all individuals have the capacity to envision multiple identities for themselves and others, the concrete implications this has for peace and conflict, and the exact mechanics of the processes involved, have yet to be fully understood or described. As Rousseau and van der Veen point out: 'while many authors claim that actors have multiple identities, they provide little guidance on the number of identities available or the specific thresholds triggering a shift between identities' (2005: 690). In a more general criticism, Schwartz et al. remark that 'despite the explicitly stated importance of identity in [analyses of terrorism]... identity is

## *Disarming Weaponized Identities - Limitations and Opportunities*

treated as a “black box” within and between individuals, groups, and cultures, with little explanation about what it is or how it operates’ (Schwartz et al. 2009: 539-540).

In addition to the challenges of theoretical integration and risks of continued disintegration, the current state of crisis in identity theory is likely to be responsible for serious general misconceptions as to how identities function. For instance, while there has been substantial literature establishing how identities are deliberately constructed and manipulated in order to achieve various cultural and political aims, the idea that identities are discrete entities that can somehow be assigned to specific individuals or communities, largely unchanging in the way that they are accessed and expressed, continues to occupy a central position in peace and conflict theory and practice (Reimann 2001; Chandra 2001; Cuhadar & Dayton 2011). In this vein, Orjuela notes that, ‘it is surprising that the understanding of identity dynamics by researchers and practitioners is so often simplistic and unreflecting’ given ‘the importance of identity in contemporary conflicts and the attention paid to it by peace practitioners’ (Orjuela 2008: 14). Thus, not only is the field faced with the challenge of integrating often disparate explanatory models, it must break down and displace misconceptions with its newly integrated theories. Failure to do either effectively will be likely to result in continued theoretical malaise, stagnation of scientific discovery and under optimized, ineffective, or even counterproductive policy and practice.

### **Methodological Challenges**

As we have suggested above, this state of theoretical disintegration has a direct negative impact on the ability to build models to guide practitioners in the peace and conflict field. Given the fact that, as Orjuela states, ‘contemporary wars are to a large extent about identity politics, [therefore] peacebuilding is bound to be too’ (2008: 13), an inability to create practitioner friendly models which can be widely distributed is surely a critical bottleneck in peace and conflict programming. Certainly, international organisations recognize identity as an asset in peace-building. For instance, UNESCO has emphasized the potential role of cultural diversity and identity in sustainable peace in the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, noting that identity ‘is indispensable for peace and security at the local, national and international levels’ (2005: 2). And, more recently, in a demonstration of the infiltration of the critical theoretical insight on the dual nature of identity we have highlighted throughout this paper, a joint report by the United Nations and the World Bank acknowledged that ‘particular aspects of people’s identities can be mobilized for large-scale collective action, whether for constructive or harmful purposes’ (2018: 125).

Despite the progress that there has been towards understanding and analyzing the role of identities in conflict and peace building—for instance through the in-group or positioning models—there are few, if any, concrete programming guidelines for practitioners working in the field to follow. Here again, theoretical confusion and breadth of perspectives seems to be a root cause. As Rousseau and van der Veen proclaim, ‘the theoretical literature [on identity] provides little or no guidance for critical model parameters because the high level of

abstraction in the texts does not compel researchers to address each element of the complex process' (2005: 690). This gap between theoretical perspectives on identity and tools for practice on the ground is widely acknowledged (Cuahdar & Dayton 2011). Beyond the fact that the term identity 'has virtually no shared, precise meaning or meanings' (Côté 2006: 8; c.f. Rattansi & Phoenix 2005: 98; c.f Brewer 2001:115), little guidance exists as to identifying and working with the content and processes of identity (Vignoles 2011). For example, Funk notes that 'the tie between identity theory and reconciliation, an aspect of peacebuilding theory, remains underdeveloped' (2013: 2). Gillard similarly laments that, 'while all these theories [on identity] have much to say about the way in which intercommunal relationships break down during conflict, they have relatively little to offer on the processes whereby those relationships might be rebuilt' (2001: 83).

While it is clearly highly valuable for any explanatory model to help the practitioner conceive how identity factors could be perceived and utilized within conflict transformation, and to think through the ways in which relationships in conflict could be re-imagined (c.f. Rothman & Olson 2001), the integration of step-by-step data-gathering, analysis and strategy-building methodologies seems essential in order to build real world programming on any scale. For instance, given that a key technique of identity weaponization resides in its depluralizing of cultural referents, few practical tools exist to incorporate research methods, (such as discourse analysis and ethnographic data gathering), which might be able to map the affected cultural concepts/narratives, or to provide a dynamic platform to conceive strategies to counter their use in weaponization. The Organization for Identity and Cultural Development (OICD)'s Engagement Methodology for Identities in Conflict (EMIC) incorporates this modelling and research approach.

Likewise, despite the fact that weaponization itself exhibits the power of compounding its techniques to increase its overall effectiveness, there is also no systematic tool to cross-reference and combine counter weaponization techniques. Methods that aim to boost the prominence of inclusive symbols and concepts (e.g., in-group approaches), for instance, are conceived in isolation from strategies which set out to identify and rearticulate cultural referents under threat. Even when applicable social science research methods exist to allow cross-referencing to be undertaken (e.g., approaches that combine discourse analysis and ethnography mentioned above—see Hammack, 2008), the lack of systematic integration of such methods with new or existing theoretical models which explain how it can be achieved, as well as the lack of availability of relevant practitioner training programs that teach method, leaves even informed practitioners with significant challenges of practical utilization.

### **Concerns over 'social programming' or 'social conditioning' and fear of backlash**

These substantial limitations of theory and practice are, unfortunately, not the only barriers to successful identity disarmament or prevention/immunization. While increasing numbers of practitioners working in the peace and conflict space are aware of the critical role of identity in conflict, and of the need to engage identities in order to prevent or ameliorate violence, there

## *Disarming Weaponized Identities - Limitations and Opportunities*

is widespread skepticism and ambivalence concerning how to approach identity in practice. A common concern is that programs which aim to harness identity as an asset in peacebuilding can backfire, and several scholars have voiced their apprehension in recruiting identity for preventing or alleviating conflict (Aitken 2007; Jean 2006 5-6; Orjuela 2008). Further, there are substantial concerns with the difficulty of implementing counter narratives because the propaganda political agents use to manipulate identities is seen as sophisticated.

One example of this is the notion that emotive narratives of national belonging can override those that attempt to divide intra-nationally. The construction and promotion of such national identities has thus long been perceived as a tool to combat conflict in the field of international relations. Such approaches are not without their risks and limitations, however, and it has become clear that simply imposing cultural narratives of sameness and inclusivity onto group(s) of people can not only fail to have the desired cohesive outcome, but can serve to drive communities even farther apart. For example, after Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, the Kosovar government, with assistance from the European Union, aimed to create a strong national identity to bring together both Serbian and Albanian communities that remained isolated following the 1999 war. This tactic, however, backfired, and many ethnic Serbian communities feel that the new identity is even more exclusively Albanian than it was before (Kostovicova 2005). Further, as noted above, programs aimed towards engaging identities as tools in peacebuilding have at times had adverse effects, such as in Afghanistan and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Aitken 2007), driving home the need for discretion and careful strategizing when using identity as an asset to forge social cohesion.

This ambivalence towards identity and the recognition of its dual potential to either cause or mitigate conflict may be seen to have led to a catch-22 where fear of engaging identities leads to a lack of theoretical and practical development of identity-based solutions, resulting in ineffective identity engagement with a high risk of backlash or recurrence. An example where such danger is apparent is Rwanda, where, rather than risk reigniting the conflict, the Rwandan government has outlawed the public discussion of Rwandan ethnic identities, preventing Rwandans from exploring and addressing the divisions that led to the 1994 genocide, as well as impeding the development of identity-based solutions to address previous and possible future conflict. This silence on identity has not only hampered the reconciliation process but has also left practitioners with few available avenues for exploring the potential of policies to address identity-based divisions (Power 2013: 1-9).

### **Overcoming the Limitations**

We have thus far discussed significant limitations to the utilization of identity for peace and cohesion building including: a compartmentalized theoretical landscape and lack of common taxonomy; general misconceptions across academic and practitioner communities as to how identity functions; the lack of systematic methodologies to employ identity-based knowledge in real world programming; and, a general sense of fear and skepticism of engaging with identity-based conflict. Lest the scope of these limitations compel us towards pessimism and

## *Disarming Weaponized Identities - Limitations and Opportunities*

inaction, it is important to recognize that the risks and costs of *not* engaging with identity as a means to counter conflict and promote peace and cohesion are significant. Reconciliation or prevention programs that are pursued *without* a critical understanding of, and sustained engagement with the identities involved have a heightened chance of failure, with conflict having a higher chance of re-emerging at a later time (Licklider 1995), and often with greater virulence (c.f. Rothman 2001: 296). Likewise, a lack of focus on identity can alienate or exclude, or even strengthen divisions between, various groups. Examples here include the Bosnian conflict, which despite being 'settled' through negotiation, reemerged shortly after because the core identity issues were not resolved during the initial peace talks (Rothman 2000: 290). Similarly, the signing of the Arusha Accords, which intended to bring an end to conflict in Rwanda, only contributed to the construction of more antagonistic identities, which contributed to the instigation of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 (Jean 2006: 5-6).

Even given the scale of the current limitations, evidence points to the fact that identity-based interventions have been more successful in ameliorating conflict than non identity-based intervention policies (such as policies that focus on economic interests or material resources alone) in conflict and post-conflict scenarios. For example, Licklider's (1995) review of several case studies found that reconciliation after identity-based civil wars which did not involve specific attention to identity were 19% more likely to result in genocide or politicide. Community-level violence is also more likely to decrease after violent conflict if the identities of all parties are engaged (Bremner, 2017). Given the risks of not employing identity-based knowledge and practice to conflict and peace building, and the benefits of doing so effectively, working to overcome the current limitations of this field is surely a critical priority.

Turning first to the theoretical limitations, it is clear that an effort must be made to build an integrated and jargon-free framework that can focus on how identity operates within conflict and peace building without losing any of the resolution that specific disciplinary knowledge on identity brings to the subject. Building such a framework represents a significant interdisciplinary undertaking. On the positive side, there are already evolved frameworks such as positioning theory that are able to model the dynamic features of weaponization. Such theories can be built upon, perhaps specifically by setting out to model the dynamics of alternative processes such as disarmament, immunization and harmonization, and the "laws" that define their workings. Such theoretical work should concentrate on building a technical language and taxonomy which practitioners will find useful to work with and implement. There may also be some utility in framing such work within an 'identity pathology' model, following evidence provided by scholars such as Thoits (1983; 1999; 2003), that reveals the benefits of broad access to a range of identity options. However, more integration of existing research in this and related fields is necessary in order to fully flesh out the idea that weaponization negatively affects mental health and well-being.

In overcoming methodological limitations, it is clear that a systematic approach with trainable methods is necessary in order to bridge the gaps between theory and practice. In order to achieve this, such methods must be able to model, anticipate and render the effects of weaponization of a given cultural context and thereby provide a platform for effective

disarmament and immunization. To capture the self-society nature of identity dynamics in a given context, research and analysis methods that allow mapping of symbolic cultural markers or referents and how they appear to the self-representation system, and also how they change and shift, are essential. We follow Hammack (2008) who makes a comprehensive argument for the need to integrate cognitive, social, and cultural levels of analysis in order to reveal the necessary self-society detail behind identity-based conflict drivers. More specifically, Hammack argues for a 'methodological combination of ethnography and idiography' which can have the potential to reveal a 'fully contextualized perspective on personhood' (2008: 240). Given this paper's emphasis on the ways in which weaponization delivery functions to resonate with individuals using commonly shared cultural concepts, we feel this methodological approach has great potential in real-world programming,<sup>4</sup> and have adapted it for systematic deployment through the OICD's EMIC Method referenced above.

Indeed, such a focus has the potential to expose vulnerabilities inherent in the resulting weaponized identities. For instance, given that all cultural environments are highly complex and diverse and symbolically multifaceted, it is highly likely that weaponization will not have affected all available in-group membership cultural expressions. Understanding which in-group cultural memberships, and which moderate out-group connections, remain intact could represent critical information for conflict transformation programming. Similarly, understanding which zones of in-group identification are likely to resist intra-cultural separation prior to weaponization may help in the development of key preventative strategies for effective immunization. Likewise, understanding how cultural referent removal and reassociation has been accomplished and strategizing how plurality can be returned to the cultural environment is essential and becomes possible with a set of methods that can reveal such dynamics.<sup>5</sup>

Overcoming the limitations of theory and practice through a theory-method model which provides jargon-free explanatory frameworks and concrete, trainable methods for applying this understanding in practice, will represent a significant step forward in unlocking identity's transformative potential. In turn, an integrated and trainable model-method package built from a combined knowledge of the risks and limitations of a range of contexts, could facilitate a greater knowledge and confidence across the sector, which, in itself, may assist in overcoming the limitations of misconceptions, fear and skepticism. Doing so would build upon the power of dynamic models, guiding the collection and mapping of context-specific data, and finally directing the practitioner in specific strategy designs that counter and demonstrate the most salient weaponization/disarmament techniques as they occur in a given context.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>4</sup> The authors are anthropologists whose interest in this field began with seeing the potential in applying ethnographic methods to conflict and peace building.

<sup>5</sup> This technique of weaponization is perhaps least understood and yet has great potential to be employed in reverse as a tool for positive change.

## *Disarming Weaponized Identities - Limitations and Opportunities*

Without a fully integrated theoretical and practical tool set that can model and engage with the complex dynamics of identity weaponization, it is perhaps unsurprising that the high optimism—the promise of identity—in conflict and peace scholarship has not yet been fulfilled in practice. In setting out to provide a profile of the key processes through which human identities pass in order to render them tools for social division and violence, and discussing how these processes highlight the usefulness and limitations of current peace and conflict practice approaches, we have hoped to draw attention to necessary steps in working towards the fulfillment of this promise. While the challenges of overcoming these limitations and making such progress are significant, the biggest hurdles seem very much under our own control. The creation, expansion and support of interdisciplinary networks of academics and practitioners who share a common purpose to integrate identity theory and to develop, test and optimize methodologies, is an obvious, and critically important, first step.

In conclusion, we must stress the importance of setting out a transparent morally viable framework for such a renewed interdisciplinary focus on identity and conflict. Beyond the obvious fact that we share a responsibility to ensure we are fully aware of the gravity and consequences of such work, without a clear moral rationale renewed efforts in this space run the risk of increasing existing fear and skepticism towards employing identity-based approaches, to the detriment of even the most refined models and methods. As we have suggested, there may be great scope and utility in developing a 'pathology' framework. Yet we also must somehow find a way to integrate Bar-Tal's dual observations that conflict-supporting narratives are necessary for groups to rise up and defeat oppressors and that these groups must be able to do so without foreign actors--themselves convinced by the power of carefully constructed narratives--exerting their influence. Such scenarios require further study to determine whether or not all conflict-supporting narratives require divisive weaponization processes to be enacted. Isolating the elements of weaponization that are universally detrimental to sustaining human psychological, social and cultural dimensions of human life will add further utility to theory and practice outcomes. As with the other challenges, a renewed and collaborative focus on identity and conflict which integrates the key insights of social, behavioural and neurobiological sciences will provide the best opportunity to step up to fully deliver on the promise of identity.

### **Author credits**

The original version of this paper was authored by Bruce White and Emilia Group. Jasmine Kato-Naughton has provided updates and additions in the latest version.

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## Disarming Weaponized Identities - Limitations and Opportunities

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