# Preventing and Disarming Weaponized Identities: Limitations and Opportunities
## Bruce White and Emilia Groupp (draft paper, 2019)

**OVERVIEW:** This paper addresses the role identity manipulation causes in significant violent conflicts. The authors show the positive power available in actively engaging identities, in order to counter negative identity manipulations. The interdisciplinary nature of identity research, however, means many of the relevant theoretical and methodological approaches are disparate and dissagregated. Nonetheless, it is important to overcome these limitations, in order to create practitioner-accessible models and methodologies, which use identity solutions to build strategic tools for conflict transformation and cohesion building.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity, Identity Weaponization, Singularization, Intractable Conflict, Discourse Analysis, Peacebuilding

## THE PROMISE OF IDENTITY AS A TOOL:
Scholarly findings suggest that effective engagement with identity offers great promise in addressing division and promoting peace and cohesion. Because, if identity dynamics can be tools used to generate conflicts, then they can also be harnessed to prevent and reverse violence.

Divisive actors utilize a range of identity-related components (i.e. cultural narratives and symbols) to orchestrate shifts in the minds of individuals in order to motivate conflict and division. For identity is socially constructed and thus fluid and shaped by social and political forces.

Historically, political leaders have instigated divisive attitudes by psychologically manipulating local identities and manufacturing differences to advance political objectives.

## IDENTITY WEAPONIZATION:
The term identity "**weaponization**" was coined to describe the practice and the process of manipulating identities in order to cause psychological division and actual physical harm.

Identities do not have to be weaponized, but weaponization occurs because of human agency. Identities can be subject to other alternative processes such as:

- Disarmament (weaponization trajectories are reversed or rendered inoperable)
- Immunization (protection against weaponization)
- Harmonization (building peace and cohesion)

## THE TECHNIQUES OF IDENTITY WEAPONIZATION:
Identity can be seen to be a conduit that links the 'self' to 'society' and the society to the self. By exploiting the nature of identity as the primary link between self and society, weaponizers can effectively become powerful overseers of individuals and groups.

By using the Trojan-horse technique to gain control over the psychosocial environments, through manipulations of commonly available cultural information (i.e. narratives, discourses and symbols), helps to explain how weaponization can affect many thousands of people simultaneously through strategies like mass propaganda.

Accordingly, identity weaponization techniques exploit key vulnerabilities in the way identity links the self to society. Weaponization delivers strategically manipulated cultural information designed to trigger insecurity, fear of loss of meaning, threat to self-concept and senses of injustice. This is achieved through a sustained use of:

I.   Construction of cultural differences that demonize and fear-monger the out-group Other and can leverage pre-existing animosities between cultural groups to further manipulate divisions.

II.  Exclusivist notions of the in-group self-identity that justify hostilities in morally absolute terms.

III. Consistent limiting of the cultural concepts, symbols, and narratives that people use to build senses of self in the world. This selective removal of symbolic choice not only shuts-off access to previously available narratives but also attempts to legitimize newly constructed narratives of sameness and difference.

**Nonetheless, "an understanding of multiplicity of our identities can be a huge force in combating the instigation of violence based on a singular identity." (Sen, 2008)**



(*via unsplash.com*)

## DISARMING AND PREVENTING IDENTITY WEAPONIZATION – OPPORTUNITIES:

The mobilization of inclusive and shared narratives has been at the centre of peace-building strategies. 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.

Identifying weaponization techniques help to understand efforts to prevent, counter and reverse it, and how to design future counter and/or prevention/reversal strategies.

A simple counter-weaponization technique is to construct narratives of cultural sameness, such as through a "common in-group identity model". As, protecting, regenerating and promoting *inclusive* narratives is powerful. It can begin to prevent and counter exclusive identities and contribute to conflict resolution/transformation.

Counter or alternative narrative construction and promotion techniques are a process of **weaponized identity disarmament**. These techniques attempt to engage the brute force of weaponization through (ideally) *equally or more powerful* inclusive narratives.

However, a dynamic analytical model like positioning theory can attempt to combat the broad spectrum of weaponization techniques, by providing a detailed and dynamic picture of which narrative components are being manipulated/removed and how the reassociations are taking place.

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 counter systematically the divisive process in dynamic, resonant and effective ways.

## WEAPONIZED IDENTITY DISARMAMENT AND PREVENTION – LIMITATIONS:

Current solutions may not match up to the sophisticated and coordinated approach taken by weaponization itself, nor are necessarily readily available for use by practitioners.

**Questions:** *Why are identity-based approaches not a part of every practitioner's toolkit? Why aren't the techniques of identity weaponization and their counter techniques essential knowledge across the entire conflict transformation and development sector? Why does the promised potential of identity weaponization prevention/disarmament remain somewhat unfulfilled beyond the core theoretical insights of the conflict and identity subfield? And: if we can truly choose the identities we want to live within, as some scholars suggest, why does identity-based conflict still even exist at all?*

**Framework Confusion:** Academics and practitioners have been working to develop identity tools that might aid in the prevention of conflict and the promotion of peace and cohesion. Yet, each discipline has their own conceptions of what identity is, making the integration of contemporary identity theories difficult, creating a "crisis" in identity theory. Thus, a development of a common taxonomy and integration is very critical.

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**Method Vacuum:** Despite the progress towards understanding and analyzing the *potential* role of identities in conflict, there are few concrete guidelines for practitioners working in the field to follow. Few methodologies map relevant cultural symbols or narratives in order to conceive counter-narratives or alternatives to weaponization.

**"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" (Rousseau and van der Veen, 2005)**

There is also no integration between methods that aim to boost the prominence of inclusive symbols and concepts (e.g., in-group approaches). Even when applicable social science research methods exist (i.e. discourse analysis and ethnographic data gathering), there is a lack of integration with actual field-based peacebuilding training, leaving even informed practitioners with significant challenges of practical utilization.

**Fear of Backlash:** A common concern is that programs which aim to harness identity for peacebuilding can backfire. Ambivalence towards identity: The recognition of its dual potential to either cause or mitigate conflict may have led to a catch-22 where fear of engaging identities leads to a lack of theoretical and practical development of identity-based solutions. As simply imposing cultural narratives of sameness and inclusivity onto groups of people can not only fail to have the desired cohesive outcome but can serve to drive communities even further apart.

Example: The Rwandan government has outlawed any public discussion of Rwandan ethnic identities, preventing community healing and 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.

**TO CONCLUDE:**
Despite the concerns of backlash and the lack of integrated approaches, the risks and costs of not engaging identity are clear. Identity weaponization is a constant and consistent threat to peace and an accelerant to war. 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.

- There needs to be a more focused and complete framework for understanding how identity weaponization works.
- It is vital to understand in detail how weaponization manipulates inter and intra-cultural boundaries in order to produce effective counter-narratives.
- It is important to understand in detail how weaponization is removing and limiting cultural narratives and options in order to build strategies that counter this technique.

- There needs to be a systematic approach and methodology that can provide a detailed understanding of the narrative components of any given weaponization context.

**REFERENCE:**
White, B. and Groupp, E. (2019). Disarming Weaponized Identities Limitations and Opportunities. *Pre-publication DRAFT paper. 2019*, pp.1–27.

**LINK:** https://oicd.net/wp-content/uploads/weaponizedidentitiesOICD.pdf

**GLOSSARY:**
**Discourse analysis:** A research method for studying written or spoken language in relation to its social context. Aims to understand how language is used in real life situations.
**Ethnography**: A method of research used in Anthropology based on participant observation to learn about lives and cultures of a particular group.
**Trojan-horse technique:** A person or thing intended to undermine or secretly overthrow an enemy or opponent.

Something else you would like included in this glossary? Let us know here.