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IDENTITY IS MORE THAN MEETS THE “I”: THE POWER OF IDENTITY IN SHAPING NEGOTIATION BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, researchers have explored the concept of identity and its impact on negotiator behavior. Many negotiators assume that identity is fixed in time and context. This essay argues that in most situations, a negotiator's identity is fungible. Who we are depends in part upon with whom we interact. Therefore, with greater self-awareness, we can consciously change our identity in ways that improve our ability to reach wise negotiation outcomes in an efficient and effective way.

I. INTRODUCTION: THREE PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTITY-BASED NEGOTIATION RESEARCH

As the Berlin Wall came to a crashing fall, so too did the equilibrium of global tensions. The Soviet Union lost its Superpower status, communism lost its reign over much of Europe, and both the United States and the Soviet Union reduced their level of support for proxy states of their Cold War. In many countries, ethnopolitical tensions combusted. The result was an explosion of intrastate violence, refugee transmigration, and political instability.

Amidst this backdrop, many researchers on conflict resolution and negotiation joined a growing research track working to understand *intergroup identity conflict*.¹ Known in short as “identity-based conflict,”² this area of

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1. R.J. Fisher, *Developing the Field of Interactive Conflict Resolution*, 14 POL. PSYCHOL. 123, 123-38 (1993); Nadim N. Rouhana & Herbert C. Kelman, *Promoting Joint Thinking in International Conflicts: An Israeli-Palestinian Continuing Workshop*, 50 J. SOC. ISSUES 157, 157-78 (1994); V.D. Volkan, *Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large Group Identity*, 34 GROUP ANALYSIS 79, 79-97 (2001).

2. JAY ROTHMAN, *RESOLVING IDENTITY-BASED CONFLICT* (1997).

study focuses on disagreement or warfare between groups divided along ethnic, political, religious, or cultural lines. Identity is conceived as a set of stable characteristics focused on one's *group* affiliations, beliefs, and shared values.

Meanwhile, other identity-based negotiation research has turned from the group to the individual level, studying *intrapersonal identity*.³ At this level, identity is understood to be the story you tell yourself about yourself.⁴ An identity conflict manifests when there is a conflict between your view of yourself and an alternative view of yourself. An associate at a law firm may feel an intrapersonal identity conflict when she sees herself as a loyal associate, but decides to switch to a neighboring firm that offers her a higher salary. The associate may wonder: Am I a loyal person, or am I willing to betray friends for the right price?

The focus of this essay is on a third level of one's identity that stands at the crossroads between individual and group identity. This research track focuses on *interpersonal identity*, also known as "relational identity."⁵ Your relational identity is the way you conceive of yourself in relation to someone else with whom you are interacting. In other words, the way you conceive of yourself is dependent, at least in part, on with whom you interact. In a relationship with one's boss, a person may be obsequious and accommodating. That same person may be assertive and outgoing in his relationship with his children. In either case, the identity of the individual as a servile worker or loving father becomes enwrapped in the quality and type of relationship.

In this brief essay, I describe two mistaken assumptions about identity that can negatively impact the negotiation process and outcome. These two assumptions are that a negotiator's identity is constant across time and across context. These assumptions are based on the general idea that a negotiator's identity is an immutable given—that it does not and cannot change.⁶ I argue that a better assumption is that a negotiator can choose many elements of his or her identity, which can lead to an improved negotiation process and outcome.

II. MISTAKEN ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT IDENTITY

No two negotiators act in an identical way. One might calmly ask a series

3. See W.W. WILMOT & J.L. HOCKER, *INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT* (5th ed. 1998).

4. DOUGLAS STONE ET AL., *DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST* (1999).

5. Daniel L. Shapiro, *Negotiating Emotions*, 20 *CONFLICT RESOL. Q.* 67, 67-82 (2002).

6. *CULTURE & NEGOTIATION* (Guy Oliver Faure & Jeffrey Z. Rubin eds., 1993).

of questions when faced with an angry counterpart, while a second in the same circumstance might become quiet and reserved.

Negotiation involves an infinite set of behavioral choices, and each negotiator's relational identity accounts for much of the behavioral variation among negotiators.⁷ The way we interact with others is largely a consequence of who we think we are, who we think others think we are, and who we think others think we think we are.⁸

However, many negotiators see their identity as fixed.⁹ They tend to assume that their behavior is an unflappable product of their unchangeable identity: "I cannot change the way I act, because I cannot change the person I am." This thinking is the result of two assumptions that leave a negotiator frozen in his or her current behavioral regime.

A. Mistaken Assumption # 1: Identity is Constant Across TIME

Negotiators often assume that their identity is constant across time. Two reasons support the partial validity of this assumption. First, for most people, our sense of selfhood *feels* consistent over time. Whether or not we continue to enjoy hopscotch or teddy bears beyond our childhood years, we recognize that we are the only person who personally experienced the multiple stages of our own life, and we still may recall viscerally the emotional wave that accompanied our first kiss, our first day of college, or the moment we learned that someone close to us died. Second, certain elements of our behavior imprint an indelible mark upon our perceived identity. A lawyer who commits an unethical act at work may come to believe that he is a bad person. A negotiator who is never able to assert her own interests may come to see herself as victim to the discretion of others. Such self-conceptions may stay with a person for weeks, years, or a lifetime.

Nevertheless, our identities consist of two basic elements, an "I" and a

7. See T. Hicks, *Another Look at Identity-Based Conflict: The Roots of Conflict in the Psychology of Consciousness*, 17 NEGOTIATION J. 37 (2001); Leo F. Smyth, *Intractable Conflicts and the Role of Identity*, 10 NEGOTIATION J. 311, 311-21 (1994).

8. See generally R.D. LAING, *THE DIVIDED SELF: AN EXISTENTIAL STUDY IN SANITY AND MADNESS* (1969); R.D. LAING, *SELF AND OTHERS* (1971); Caroline Howarth, *Identity in Whose Eyes? The Role of Representations in Identity Construction*, 32 J. THEORY SOC. BEHAV. 145, 145-62 (2002).

9. People in individualistic cultures may tend to believe in the immutability of relational identity more than those from collectivist cultures. In a collectivist culture, people tend to take on the values of the social groups to which they belong. Changed group membership would constitute a changed sense of relational identity. In contrast, people in an individualistic culture tend to see themselves as consistent across time and context. They view their identity as a constant whether interacting with one group or another.

“me,” and these both change over time.¹⁰ No one is the exact same person he or she was ten years ago.

The “me” is the narrative you tell yourself about yourself. It is your self-concept, a schema about yourself that you build at both a conscious and unconscious level. The “me” is constantly under construction and constantly trying to make sense of the emotions, thoughts, and behavior that you experience. If you excel at swimming, you may begin to think of yourself as a good swimmer. If others laugh at your jokes, you may conceive of yourself (i.e., your “me”) as a good joke teller.

If the “me” is the narrative you tell yourself about yourself, then who is the person constructing that story? What is the difference between your self-narrative and “you”? The “I” is a metaphor for the automatic thoughts, feelings, and actions that you experience and that seem outside of your control. It is your experiential self, your unfiltered visceral and cognitive experience of the world as you live it. When you find yourself absorbed by music or work, your “I” dominates your experience. When you are driving on the highway without much effort or thought, you are at the whim of your “I.” When you are writing an article and are completely enraptured in the flow of what you are writing,¹¹ you are in the untainted hands of your “I.” Or when “Gone with the Wind” stirs you to tears, that is your “I” in action.

The important point is that the “I” and the “me” each change as you have new experiences, and they each influence one another.¹² As you develop a new sense of yourself, a revised “me,” your “I” experiences the world in a different light. And revisions of your “I” contribute to a revised sense of your “me.” As you react in new and different ways, you tend to construct a modified understanding of “who you are.”

B. Mistaken Assumption #2: Identity is Constant Across CONTEXTS

A second common assumption is that a negotiator’s identity is consistent across contexts.¹³ This assumption is prevalent in many conflict assessment

10. See generally PETER HARTLEY, *INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION* (1993); IVANA MARKOVA, *HUMAN AWARENESS: ITS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT* (1987); GEORGE H. MEAD, *MIND, SELF, & SOCIETY* (1934); CARL R. ROGERS, *CLIENT-CENTERED THERAPY: ITS CURRENT PRACTICE, IMPLICATIONS AND THEORY* (1951); CARL R. ROGERS, *ON BECOMING A PERSON* (1961); CARL R. ROGERS & BARRY STEVENS, *PERSON TO PERSON: THE PROBLEM OF BEING HUMAN* (1967); Daniel Shapiro, *Vertigo: The Impact of Strong Emotions on Negotiation*, *PSYCHOANALYTIC INQUIRY* (forthcoming).

11. MIHAZY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, *FLOW: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE* (1990).

12. See Shapiro, *supra* note 10.

13. LOUIS KRIESBERG, *CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS: FROM ESCALATION TO RESOLUTION* 57-64 (1998) (discussing the ways identity is socially constructed and affects constructive or destructive interaction within and between groups).

instruments, which ask a negotiator to assess his or her conflict style. Is a person's conflict style that of avoidance, collaboration, accommodation, compromise, or confrontation? Such instruments assume that negotiator behavior is consistent regardless of context.

This assumption is not wholly invalid. A lawyer who strongly asserts her views with opposing counsel may also strongly assert her views in all other conversations—whether talking with a client, a colleague, a spouse, or a child. Similarly, some people seek actively to avoid any hint of conflict not only with their bosses, but also with everyone else in their lives.

Yet most of the time a negotiator's behavior changes significantly across contexts. Our identity is largely relational.¹⁴ We interact differently with different people.

One's relational identity has emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences. In a relationship with a despised boss, a subordinate may feel tense and resentful, acting in ways that spite the boss. In a relationship with a loving spouse, that same person may feel emotions of tenderness and affection, acting in ways that support the relationship.

In a negotiation, the relational identity that we co-construct as we interact with the other person and the resulting emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences on us and on the other do not always serve our negotiating purposes. We may fail to speak up in an interaction with an outgoing counterpart. Or we may be overly assertive with a reserved other who decides not to negotiate with us in a cooperative manner.

This "relational identity" consists of two main elements: autonomy and affiliation.¹⁵ Autonomy is the freedom to choose your own actions.¹⁶ When the other side's negotiator "*tells*" you where to meet for lunch or gives you *the final proposal* without first consulting you on it, your autonomy may feel impinged. Affiliation is a sense of interpersonal connection. You may feel closely affiliated to some colleagues, whereas affiliation may be difficult to build with others.

The degree to which a negotiator feels a sense of autonomy and affiliation typically varies with context. A lawyer may feel a great amount of autonomy in advocating for a client's needs. Yet that same lawyer may feel very little autonomy in advocating for her own needs in her relationship with her husband at home. Likewise, a lawyer may feel a great deal of emotional openness and affiliation toward a friendly client, while feeling anxiety about

14. Shapiro, *supra* note 5.

15. *Id.*; Shapiro, *supra* note 10.

16. JAMES R. AVERILL & ELMA P. NUNLEY, VOYAGES OF THE HEART: LIVING AN EMOTIONALLY CREATIVE LIFE 241-56 (1992).

disclosing even trivial personal information to an angry client.

III. A BETTER ASSUMPTION: NEGOTIATORS CAN CONSTRUCT THEIR IDENTITIES

Negotiators often fail to realize that their own assumptions about identity can handicap their behavior. If we assume that identity is rigid and fixed, we may end up meeting fewer of our interests than we otherwise could. Conversely, if we assume that identities are fungible, an important consequence is that we can choose how we want to be treated in a negotiation—and how we want to treat others.¹⁷

Self-awareness is the first step toward choosing alternative ways of acting that enhance our negotiation efficacy. Such awareness can provoke powerful learning about ourselves. Are we more emotionally disclosing with our colleagues than our spouse? Why? What might we do to change the situation, if so desired? Self-awareness allows the “me” to understand the automatic activity of the “I.” The “me” can then rationally think about what activities improve negotiation success and what behaviors constrain behavior. Through this process, we can choose new behaviors that satisfy more of our interests and needs in a negotiation.

Mindfulness is a key skill in becoming more self-aware. Professor Leonard Riskin researches the negotiation power that can be derived from noticing, without judgment, the experiences and feelings that pass through one’s awareness.¹⁸ Mindfulness enables a negotiator to become aware of internal thoughts and feelings of ambivalence, strong emotional pulls, and cravings for power.¹⁹ Rather than reacting immediately to those feelings and thoughts, the mindful negotiator can reflect on wise options for behavior.²⁰

There are a number of popular activities that help people become more aware of their relational identity in a negotiation. For example, consider the Interpersonal Skills Exercise developed at Harvard Law School for its

17. The notion of relational identity has implications for large scale conflicts. Groups involved in an ethnopolitical conflict often view one another as adversaries. They see this relational identity as fixed. The theory of relational identity suggests that, on the contrary, groups can co-construct new ways of interacting with one another that promote cooperative behavior. The transformative process is by no means simple. A forthcoming chapter by Shapiro and Liu in the book *PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO DEALING WITH CONFLICT AND WAR* (Mari Fitduff & Chris E. Stout eds., forthcoming 2004) details the application of relational identity to ethnopolitical conflict management.

18. Leonard L. Riskin, *The Contemplative Lawyer: On the Potential Contributions of Mindfulness Meditation to Law Students, Lawyers, and Their Clients*, 7 *HARV. NEGOT. L. REV.* 1 (2002).

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

negotiation workshops.²¹ In this exercise, students work in small teams with fellow students, a course instructor, and a family systems psychotherapist. Each student brings to the exercise an interpersonal skill that he or she has difficulty performing, such as saying “no” to requests by a good friend.²² Through the use of role plays, videotaping, and certain aspects of psychodrama, the student practices the challenging interpersonal skill in a safe, intensive, and interactive environment. Feedback is provided by peers and the course instructor.

In the process of developing a skill set that may be lacking, students often learn that the behavior in which they want to engage does not comport with their own conception of who they are, regardless of with whom they are interacting. This is an intrapersonal identity conflict. However, in many cases, students are faced with the reality that they have a particular skill set but are unable to use it in specific types of relationships. A student may be very assertive when representing her client, but may be unable to assert her own wishes in a negotiation with her spouse or boss. This is the territory of a relational identity conflict.

Through the Interpersonal Skills Exercise, students learn more about the internal, automatic scripts that shape much of their behavior (i.e., their “I”). They also learn more about their self-conception, their “me.” Hence, they are able to recognize interpersonal situations in which they unduly limit or expand their own autonomy or affiliation to their detriment. They might realize that their decision not to ask for a salary raise is based upon an autonomy-limiting assumption that “the boss would not give it to me anyway.” Or they might realize that their decision to accommodate all requests by colleagues is based upon the unrealistic assumption that positive affiliations between people can be maintained only if there is no disagreement between them. As a result of such realizations, students have the empowering opportunity to *choose* whether they want to continue typical patterns of behavior, or to modify their behavior to improve the process and outcome of their negotiation.

An adapted version of the IPS exercise can be done in virtually any classroom. The teacher instructs students to list the many roles they play in their own lives. An illustrative list may include: student, girlfriend, roommate, daughter, and waitress. Students are asked to write down a typical interpersonal conflict they encounter in each of the different roles. Next they evaluate the degree of difficulty they experience in communicating their

21. Robert C. Bordone, *Teaching Interpersonal Skills for Negotiation and for Life*, 16 NEGOTIATION J. 377, 377-85 (2000).

22. *Id.*

interests efficiently and effectively within each role. The last step of the exercise is to have students analyze why it is harder for them to express themselves effectively in certain roles over others. What barriers obstruct the effective expression of their interests? They might write up their discoveries in a confidential journal that they hand in to the professor.

IV. SUMMARY

Many negotiators assume that identity is a fixed, immutable concept. In this essay, I suggest that in most situations, identity is fungible across time and across contexts. Negotiators have the power to construct their identities in ways that improve their negotiation process and outcome. To this end, self-awareness is essential, followed by conscious decisions about how to act in ways that lead to more satisfying outcomes.