

Identity: More than Meets the “I”

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Editors’ Note: How can you expect to get good results in a negotiation if you give little thought to who you really are, and to who your counterpart is? Shapiro analyzes the research on identity, showing how you can predict the likely reactions of your counterpart to some kinds of proposals—as well as your own propensity to avoid some kinds of proposals that might be to your advantage. This chapter should be read in close conjunction with the chapters on internal conflict, psychology and perceptions.

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 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 [Heen & Stone, *Perceptions*] 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. [Avruch, *Buyer—Seller*] 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.

Mistaken Assumptions About Identity

Many negotiators see their identity as fixed. People in individualistic cultures, in particular, 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 their identity as consistent whether across time or context, and they view their identity as a constant whether interacting with one group or another. Thus, behavior is seen as an unflappable product of one's 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.

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 experienced personally 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 "me"—and these both change over time.⁷ 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,⁸ 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 each influences the other.⁹ 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.”

Mistaken Assumption #2: Identity is Constant Across CONTEXTS

A second common assumption is that a negotiator’s identity is consistent across contexts.¹⁰ This assumption is prevalent in many conflict assessment 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.¹¹ We interact differently with different people. 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.¹² Autonomy is the freedom to choose your own actions.¹³ 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 interper-

sonal 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 disclosing even trivial personal information with an angry client.

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 fail to adapt to the dynamic circumstances of which we are a part and 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.¹⁴

Self-awareness is a 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 with 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 [Riskin, *Mindfulness*] researches the negotiation power that can be derived from noticing, without judgment, the experiences and feelings that pass through one's awareness.¹⁵ Mindfulness enables a negotiator to become aware of internal thoughts and feelings of ambivalence, strong emotional pulls, and cravings for power. Rather than reacting immediately to those feelings and thoughts, the mindful negotiator can reflect on wise options for behavior.

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 their negotiation workshops.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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 their automated thoughts, feelings, and 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 wouldn’t give it to me anyway.” Or they might realize that their decision to accommodate to all requests by colleagues is based upon the unrealistic assumption that positive affiliations between people can only be maintained 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.

Another exercise to help students explore issues of relational identity is the “Relational Identity Exercise” (RIE). A facilitator can run through the steps of the activity with students, having them independently write down their responses during each step:

- Ask students to identify a recent interpersonal conflict in which they did not express themselves as well as they could have (e.g., “I recently got into an argument with my mother about whether to come home for Thanksgiving, and half-way through the conversation, I got so mad that I hung up on her”).
- Have students analyze ways in which they unduly limited or expanded their autonomy and affiliation in the situation. For example, did they feel overly constrained in terms of their autonomy to speak back to the other person? Did they feel too affiliated to the other person to raise issues that might upset the other?
- Tell students to imagine that their conflict situation will recur tomorrow. Given their better understanding of their identity-based concerns, have them consider one action they might say or do differently to improve the situation.
- Review the exercise with students, asking questions such as: what did you learn about yourself from this activity? What did you learn about the power of identity in your negotiations?
- Optional: have students write up their discoveries in a confidential journal that they hand in to the professor.

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.

Endnotes

The author wishes to express gratitude to Chris Honeyman, Andrea Schneider and Michael Moffitt for feedback on earlier drafts of this essay.

- ¹ See Ronald J. Fisher, *Training as Interactive Conflict Resolution: Characteristics and Challenges*, 2 INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATION 331 (1997); Herbert Kelman & Nadim Rouhana, *Promoting Joint Thinking in International Conflicts: An Israeli/Palestinian Continuing Workshop*, 50 JOURNAL OF SOCIAL ISSUES 157 (1994); Vamik Volkan, *Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity*, 34 GROUP ANALYSIS 79 (2001).
- ² See JAY ROTHMAN, RESOLVING IDENTITY-BASED CONFLICT: IN NATIONS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND COMMUNITIES (1997).
- ³ See WILLIAM WILMOT & JOYCE HOCKER, INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS (5th ed. 1998).
- ⁴ See DOUGLAS STONE, ET AL., DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST (1999).
- ⁵ See Daniel Shapiro, *Negotiating Emotions*, 20 CONFLICT RESOLUTION QUARTERLY 67 (2002).
- ⁶ See, e.g., CULTURE AND NEGOTIATION (Guy Faure & Jeffery Z. Rubin eds., 1993).
- ⁷ See PETER HARTLEY, INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION (1993); IVANA MARKOVA, HUMAN AWARENESS: ITS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT (1987); MIND, SELF, AND SOCIETY FROM THE STANDPOINT OF A SOCIAL BEHAVIORIST (George Mead ed., 1934); CARL R. ROGERS, CLIENT-CENTERED THERAPY: ITS CURRENT PRACTICE, IMPLICATIONS, AND THEORY (1951); CARL R. ROGERS, ON BECOMING A PERSON: A THERAPIST'S VIEW OF PSYCHOTHERAPY (1961); CARL R. ROGERS & BARRY STEVENS, PERSON TO PERSON: THE PROBLEM OF BEING HUMAN: A NEW TREND IN PSYCHOLOGY (1967); Daniel Shapiro & Vanessa Liu, *Psychology of a Stable Peace*, in THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RESOLVING GLOBAL CONFLICT: FROM WAR TO PEACE (Mari Fitzduff & Chris Stout eds., 2005).
- ⁸ See MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, FLOW: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE (1990).
- ⁹ See Daniel Shapiro, *Vertigo: The Impact of Strong Emotions on Negotiation* (2004) (Harvard Negotiation Project Working Paper) (on file with author); Shapiro & Lui, *supra*, note 7.
- ¹⁰ See LOUIS KRIESBERG, CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS: FROM ESCALATION TO RESOLUTION (1998).
- ¹¹ See Shapiro, *supra* note 5.
- ¹² See Shapiro, *supra* notes 5 & 9; Shapiro & Liu, *supra*, note 7.
- ¹³ See James Averill & Elma Nunley, *Voyages of the Heart: Living an Emotionally Creative Life* (1992).
- ¹⁴ 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 chapter by Shapiro and Liu details the application of relational identity to ethnopolitical conflict management. Shapiro & Liu, *supra*, note 7.
- ¹⁵ Leonard Riskin, *The Contemplative Lawyer: On the Potential Contributions of Mindfulness Meditation to Law Students, Lawyers, and Their Clients*, 7 HARVARD NEGOTIATION LAW REVIEW 1 (2002).
- ¹⁶ See Robert Bordone, *Teaching Interpersonal Skills for Negotiation and for Life*, 16 NEGOTIATION JOURNAL 377 (2000).
- ¹⁷ See *id.*