

The NATIONAL STRATEGY FORUM REVIEW

An Online National Security Journal Published by the National Strategy Forum

When the Best Intentions Fail: Identity and Cultural Barriers to Inter-Organizational Cooperation

By Sarah A. Hill, PhD
Royal Military College of Canada

Dr. Sarah Hill is an Associate Professor in the Military Psychology and Leadership Department at the Royal Military College of Canada. She is a graduate of Queen's University and worked as an Operational Defence Scientist for Defence Research and Development Canada prior to taking up her current position. Dr. Hill's research interests include trust, identity development, and organizational culture.

With increasing frequency, the military, like other national institutions, struggles to cooperate with other organizations/institutions in order to solve problems and perform effectively in a complex and complicated world. With the best of intentions, these cooperative ventures sometimes fail, or are experienced as more difficult than anticipated. If we consider the social behaviors of individuals and of groups, perhaps we would not be so surprised when things sometimes go awry.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and later elaborations (e.g. Hogg & Abrams, 1988) suggest that identity spans a continuum between personal and social identity. Personal identity refers to definitions of 'self' in terms of individualistic characteristics (e.g., "I am good at playing rugby"). Social identity, on the other hand, derives from category memberships (e.g., "I am Canadian" or "I am an infantry officer"). Group and category memberships are important because they also contribute to defining a person's identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990): The more that a person identifies with a group, the more he/she applies the attributes and characteristics of the group to the self. Furthermore, personal identification with the group leads to outcomes for the group being experienced as outcomes for the self (Turner et al., 1987). When social identity is made salient, group-evaluation and self-evaluation become indistinguishable (Abrams & Hogg, 2001; Gardener, Gabriel & Hochschild, 2002). Thus, since organizational membership is

a salient and consequential basis for self-categorization, it can form an important part of a person's social identity. In the case of the military, it is anticipated that 'organizational identity' is a multi-faceted construct, though it is likely that 'military member' is central to every dimension. Thus, one might hold a social identity as an Army officer and as an Infanteer simultaneously, but each identity may be more or less salient in different contexts without lessening the centrality of 'military member' within each.

Social identity is critical when we try to understand how individuals come together to form groups. One basis for the necessary attraction between individuals (to promote group formation) is identity similarity – people are drawn to others who share important aspects of their own identity (Barnett & Coulson, 2010). For example, personal characteristics such as personality, preferences for particular kinds of activities, and other idiosyncratic factors often form the basis for two or more individuals to come together when the opportunity arises. Continued experience with the group provides the context in which individuals can commingle individual attributes with group attributes, permitting the overlap between self- and group-evaluation noted above. Some authors have noted the success of 'mere exposure' as a means of enhancing cooperation between the militaries of distinct nations (Moelker, Soeters & Vom Hagen, 2007), consistent with this notion. An intriguing theory put forward by Andersen and Chen (2010) proposes an individual-level mechanism, transference, that describes the cognitive activation of representations of the self (one's identity) in relation to others that can result in repetitions of patterns of behavior, perhaps strengthening the resulting identity, and reinforcing the boundary between groups that form initially based on social identity. From social groups (e.g. "cliques") to occupational groups, individuals incorporate aspects of group identity into their own identity, and this is carried over into interactions with individuals and groups who belong to other identity groups (Brewer, 2003).

One consequence of this process of social identity formation is the tendency for individuals to classify others (individuals and groups) on the basis of their similarity to oneself. In-groups (those who share a particular group identification) and out-groups (those who do not 'belong') emerge in social contexts, and, when circumstances permit, can result in political and power dynamics that may solidify the divide between the in- and out-group(s) (Hill, 2007). The full implications of this division are beyond the scope of the current discussion, but evidence suggests that cognitive biases favouring the in-group appear to promote harmony and loyalty within the in-group (Brewer, 2003), while at the same time creating a context where disagreement with others (the out-group) and conflict can be perpetuated because actions are interpreted differently as a function of the actors involved (e.g. the in-group's actions are perceived as appropriate responses to situational contingencies, whereas the out-group's actions are perceived as indicative of attitudes or personality characteristics, which are inconsistent with the identity of the in-group). These effects seem to be strengthened when social identity is strengthened or made salient (Jehn & Bezrukova, 2010; Kampmeier & Simon, 2001).

Identity and Organizational Culture

Consider that a social group, up to and including a nation, is fundamentally an aggregation of individuals. The collective is formed through the coming together of autonomous (at least in theory) individuals, and thus succeeds or fails based on the character, actions and traits of those

individual persons (Williams, 2000). The cumulative effect of these individual efforts eventually produces a culture (organizational, professional, national and so on).

Identity and culture are, in some respects, quite similar to one another. Identity is typically treated as a more personal, experiential construct, and culture as a more publicly accessible and interpretable construct, however. At the very least, there is notional overlap between identity and culture, and they serve similar functional purposes – defining and guiding behavior and interpretation of the world by means of an established framework of assumptions, interpretations, and understandings. The focus is simply at a different level. This should be clear when considering groups – collections of individuals who share a particular ‘identity’ (as group members) that is closely tied to the group’s ‘culture’ (norms, assumptions, beliefs about what is ‘right and true’).

The political and historical literatures also provide examples linking identity and culture (e.g. Di Donato & Mahon, 2009; Meyer, 2007; Vander biesen, 2009), suggesting both that identity and culture are real facets of human social behavior (i.e., not a ‘creation’ of current social science scholars) and that the concepts have a rich meaning when considered through an interdisciplinary lens. Furthermore, although there is some disparity in the literature about the precise nature of the relationship between culture and work or organizational performance (e.g., Scott et al., 2003), there does not seem to be a rejection of the relationship per se. Future research incorporating the identity construct may provide a clue to unraveling some of the findings in this area.

Social identity theory hypothesizes that one of the results of identity formation is the emergence of distinct social groups comprised of individuals who share similar identities in some respect (‘in-groups’). For example, a person may identify gender, political affiliation, and professional category as critical component of their personal identity. Not all of these aspects are likely to be salient at any one time, though each contributes importantly to the person’s sense of who they are. Individuals who do not share these identity components (e. g. persons in a different gender category) constitute the ‘out-group.’ Culture, to the extent that it represents the interpersonal environment, may be one of the triggers that renders particular aspects of identity salient. Organizational culture, for example, may render one’s professional identity highly salient, potentially impacting reactions to perceived work-related threats (e.g. competition for resources, prestige, and organizational power). This function of social identity salience has been documented in the literature (Fischer, Haslam & Smith, 2010).

Although not extensive, there exists some literature describing the culture of the Canadian Forces (e.g., English, 2004; English et al, 2005). This body of literature presents military culture as heavily influenced by subcultures (e.g., the Army, Navy, and Air Force cultures), reliant on tradition, tactically and operationally innovative but strategically lacking, and resistant to change. Systematic examinations of Canadian military culture have not appeared in the literature¹, and common conceptualizations of that culture are therefore heavily influenced by anecdotal and idiosyncratic information and portrayals. The comparable literature describing the culture of the Department of National Defence (DND) is also extremely limited (e. g., Bland, 1997; English, 2004, Graham, 2002) and generally characterizes the civilian corporate culture as bureaucratic,

¹ Some systematic examination of subcultures has appeared, however (e.g., see DGLCD, 2005).

inflexible, disinterested (or at least uninformed) in defense issues, consensus-dependent, and reactive. The Canadian case is not the only one where thorough, detailed examinations of organizational culture(s) and group identities are lacking, although some discussion about the cultures of other national militaries (e.g., Di Cosmo, 2009; Janoski, 2009; Quinn, 2010) has appeared in the recent past, and more such work is no doubt forthcoming. There exist, nonetheless, important gaps in the existing literature.

Identity-Related Impacts on Organizational Culture

Social identity theory and group theories generate hypotheses that could be examined by means of empirical evaluations of recent events pertinent to the dynamics of interest. Canadian Forces (CF) Transformation (an organization-wide change effort that resulted in restructuring and refocusing effort in multiple domains), for example, was in part an effort to shift the culture of the Canadian military away from supporting a service (Army, Navy, Air Force) centric identity and towards supporting a CF identity (pan-service) that is more welcoming of civilian participation. Examination of the experiences of individuals who experienced CF transformation is instructive for the current discussion.

A qualitative study of National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) corporate culture, undertaken to fill one of the gaps in the literature, yielded a pattern of results consistent with the logic of social identity theory (see Hill, 2007 for a complete description of the study). Specifically, 48 senior decision makers (78% male) representing the top three layers of the organizational bureaucracy participated in a qualitative study designed to describe the organizational culture of National Defence Headquarters in Canada. This organization was of particular interest because it represents a 'blended' culture (military and civilian) that was created by the Canadian government, in part, to reduce the friction expected if the military and civilian decision makers were permitted to function autonomously (Granatstein, 1997). A similar unification of the three armed services (Army, Navy, Air Force) had been undertaken, in part for similar reasons, several years prior to the creation of the blended (military-civilian) headquarters arrangement. All participants in the study individually participated in a 60-90 minute interview, and reviewed a summary narrative based on their responses prepared immediately after the fact. The reviewed narratives provided the content for a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) focused on describing the organizational culture as experienced by the most senior members of the organization (Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces).

The model of organizational culture that emerged from the data in this case clearly demonstrated the centrality of "identity" in the overall understanding of the organizational culture as experienced by individuals working within it. Two primary identity groups were evident in the study – military personnel (primarily senior officers and a small number of senior enlisted personnel) and civilian personnel (senior public servants). Interestingly, gender differences were not observed within (or across) either of these groups, although gender is arguably one of the primary components of individual identity (Sandstrom, Martin & Fine, 2010). This suggests that professional identity was most salient for interview respondents. Combined with other facets, identity was spontaneously mentioned as one of the central aspects of the organizational culture, and was manifested in multiple ways.

Identity as ‘identification with the organization’ was particularly important for military respondents in this study. The immersive quality of military life (i.e., one is always a military member, frequently in uniform, surrounded by others who look and behave very similarly to oneself) probably explains the salience of the military identity, both individually and collectively. The prevailing culture at NDHQ is heavily colored by the military identity, and in many, perhaps even the majority, of organizational contexts, military personnel could be described as the ‘in-group’ at the highest levels of the organizational bureaucracy, at least at the time of the study.

A sample of the main findings reveals patterns that would be anticipated by social identity theory when two identity groups attempt to cooperate in a professional capacity. Remembering that identity provides a framework for understanding and interpreting everyday reality, it should not be surprising that communication, trust, and decision making were spontaneously raised in this study as areas where friction between military and civilian personnel can occur, and can be attributed, at least in part, to differences in social identity.

Impact on communication – Study participants identified the predominance of codified language in both written and verbal communications in the organizational culture. Within identity groups, particular habits of communication (e.g. references that carry particular meaning to the group, use of acronyms as short-hand communication tools) can make it difficult for out-group members to understand and decode important information. Shared experiences (e.g. military training), world views (military members are explicitly and implicitly taught to think about the world in specific ways) and communication styles (e.g., command versus consensus) both establish and maintain a boundary around strong identity groups. Consistent with social identity theory, out-group members (primarily civilians) found communication across identity groups much more challenging than did in-group members.

Impact on trust – Failure to respond according to expectations can undermine trust (Adams, Bryant & Webb, 2001; Hill, 2005), but shared assumptions were not always present across identity groups (i.e., expectations were not always articulated, nor met). Assumptions about what to expect from individuals are often implicit, and individuals in different identity groups were sometimes surprised to find that their own assumptions (e.g., about the best way to approach a problem, an optimal solution, or the resources required to achieve a goal) were not the same as those of individuals in other identity groups. In particular, recognition of achievements and expertise was experienced as lacking between identity groups. Furthermore, in-group members were less willing to accept that out-group members would be able or willing to understand the in-group perspective on some issues, viewing out-group members in an adversarial fashion when issues of competition for resources or organizational priorities were discussed, as would be expected under social identity theory. Trust was also manifest in the (un)willingness to share information across identity groups within the organizational culture, although this varied substantially as a function of the particular piece of information and the context in which it existed.

Impact on decision making – Stylistic differences in decision-making across identity groups were consistent with cultural gaps between the military and civilians (i.e., military command vs. civilian consensus). As might be expected, this was articulated as problematic more frequently by civilians, and as a frustration more frequently by the military. Friction was reported by some

respondents when stylistic expectations were not met (e.g., when some out-group individuals did not feel they had been sufficiently consulted prior to the implementation of some organizational decisions). Interestingly, when in-group members reported similar experiences, they sometimes also expressed a sense of betrayal that was absent in out-group responses. Arguably, some in-group members expected that they would play more important roles in the context of large-scale organizational change, and their sense of exclusion would have been heightened as a result.

Concluding Thoughts

The literature provides some intriguing glimpses of the benefits to be accrued from such things as ongoing exposure and common training (Hill, 2007; Moelker, Soeters & Vom Hagen, 2007; Lichacz, 2009) in the context of military activity. Social identity theory would suggest that both types of activities are likely to support the development of a ‘superordinate’ identity (or at least more nuanced understanding of multiple actors’ cultures and identities) in contexts where cooperation is required. On the other hand, friction attributed to culture (and notionally, to identity) differences have also been reported (Hill, 2007; Soeters & Manigart, 2009), highlighting the impact of neglecting to consider such influences. The relative lack of empirical work in this area also suggests that extensive gaps in current knowledge hinder attempts to understand how identity, culture, and cooperation are linked.

No more than we can perceive the lens of our eye as we observe the world, can we be fully conscious of all the impacts of our identities on our interpretation of reality. As illustrated above, however, there is a tantalizing suggestion that identity may be one of the keys to better understanding interactions between disparate (organizational) cultural groups, including the military, national government, and other organizations. Communication and trust, both reliant upon mutual understanding and shared assumptions, can be jeopardized when groups cling to their individual identities, despite best intentions to cooperate. Primarily with respect to the “unspoken” aspects of identity and culture (expectations and assumptions in particular), some friction should be expected when disparate identity groups attempt to cooperate. Performance is in part dependent upon the goals of the actors, and shared goals can be rendered more difficult to achieve if the actors do not recognize the perils of overly strong group identity in some contexts.

The preceding discussion should not suggest that identity groups are the only influence on performance in the workplace, however, nor that membership in a strong identity group like the military is somehow a handicap to cooperative behavior. Rather, there are potential pitfalls that can be either avoided or mitigated by awareness of the constraints that identity can impose on thinking, relating, and acting in particular social contexts. For example, the salience of social identities can have an impact on reactions to perceived threat (Fischer, Haslam & Smith, 2010), and the interpretation of stressful events (Levine & Reicher, 1996). A common piece of advice for facilitating cooperation between groups is the development of superordinate goals to focus the activity of two or more groups. Perhaps in addition to superordinate goals, individuals and groups must also define themselves in such a way that their identities are not (unintentionally, perhaps) inimical to achieving cooperative goals. Thus, the advice might be reframed to suggest the development of a superordinate identity within working groups to release some of the constraints of strong (individualized) organizational identification on group performance. Evaluation of ongoing inter-organizational, multinational operations and exercises (e. g., Renuart

Jr., 2010; Lichacz, 2009) could provide opportunities to evaluate the validity of this proposition, and to further evaluate the notions suggested by social identity theory.

Strong organizational cultures sometimes promote enhanced performance (Rondeau & Wagar, 1998), but the literature suggests that the relationship is not yet well-understood, and there remains the strong likelihood that additional factors must also be present in order for the observed performance improvements to manifest. Identity may be one such additional factor, particularly in the circumstance where multiple identity groups are working together on a cooperative task.

References:

Abrams, D. & Hogg M. A. (Eds.), (1990). *Social identity theory: Constructive and critical advances*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. A. (2001). Collective identity: Group membership and self-conception. In M. A. Hogg, & R. S. Tindale (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Group processes* (Vol. 3, pp. 425–461). Oxford: Blackwell.

Adams, B. D., Bryant, D. J. & Webb, R. D. G. (2001). *Trust in Teams Literature Review*. DRDC Contractor Report, CR2001-042. Defence Research and Development Canada – Toronto.

Barnett, J. & Coulson, M. (2010). Virtually real: A psychological perspective on massively multiplayer online games. *Review of General Psychology*, 14, 167-179.

Bland, D. L. (1997). *National Defence Headquarters: Centre of Decision*. Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

Brewer, M. (2003). *Intergroup Relations*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

De Moura, G. R., Abrams, D., Retter, C., Gunnarsdottir, S. & Ando, K. (2009). Identification as an organizational anchor: How identification and job satisfaction combine to predict turnover intention. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 39, 540-557.

DGLCD (2005). *Canada's Soldiers: Military ethos and Canadian values in the 21st century*. Director General Land Capability Development: Government of Canada.

Di Cosmo, N. (Ed.) (2009). *Military Culture in Imperial China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Di Donato, F. & Mahon, P. (2009). Federalism and “cultural” identities: Some remarks on the naturalisation procedure in Switzerland. *Ratio Juris*, 22, 281-294.

- English, A. (2004). *Understanding military culture: A Canadian perspective*. Montreal, PQ: McGill-Queens University Press.
- English, A., Gosselin, D., Coombs, H., & Hickey, L. M. (2005). *The Operational Art - Canadian Perspectives: Context and Concepts*. Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press.
- Fischer, P., Haslam, S. A. & Smith, L. (2010). "If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?": Social identity salience moderates support for retaliation in response to collective threat. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research and Practice*, 14, 143-150.
- Gardener, W. L., Gabriel, S. & Hochschild, L. (2002). When you and I are "we", you are not threatening: The role of self-expansion in social comparison. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 239-251.
- Graham, R. (2002). Civil control of the Canadian Forces: National direction and national command. *Canadian Military Journal*, 3, 23-29.
- Granatstein, J.L. (1997). *A Report for the Minister of National Defence*. 25 March.
- Hill, S. A. (2005). Trust within and between organizations: Implications for CF Transformation. *DRDC CORA Technical Memorandum 2005-40*, Department of National Defence.
- Hill, S. A. (2007). Corporate culture in the CF and DND: Descriptive themes and emergent models. *DRDC CORA Technical Report 2007-19*, Department of National Defence.
- Hogg, M. A., & Abrams, D. (1988). *Social identifications: A social psychology of intergroup relations and group processes*. London: Routledge.
- Janoski, T. (2009). The difference that empire makes: Institutions and politics of citizenship in Germany and Austria. *Citizenship Studies*, 13, 381-411.
- Jehn, K. A. & Bezrukova, K. (2010). The faultline activation process and the effects of activated faultlines on coalition formation, conflict, and group outcomes. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 112, 24-42.
- Kampmeier, C. & Simon, B. (2001). Individuality and group formation: The role of independence and differentiation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 448-462.
- Levine, R. M., & Reicher, S. D. (1996). Making sense of symptoms: Self-categorization and the meaning of illness and injury. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 35, 245-256.
- Lichacz, F. M. J. (2009). Calibrating situation awareness and confidence within a multinational coalition operation. *Military Psychology*, 21, 412-426.

- Meyer, C. O. (2007). Do Europeans think alike about legitimate goals for the use of force? Lessons from a comparative study of collective norms concerning the use of force. Paper presented at the ISA Conference, Chicago, IL.
- Moelker, R., Soeters, J. & Vom Hagen, U. (2007). Sympathy: The cement of interoperability. *Armed Forces and Society*, 33, 496-517.
- Renuart Jr., V. E. (2010). Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 11 March. Retrieved online 1.08.10: <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2010/03%20March/Renuart%2003-11-10.pdf>
- Rondeau, K. V. & Wagar, T. H. (1998). Hospital Chief Executive Officer perceptions of organizational culture and performance. *Hospital Topics*, 76, 14-22.
- Sandstrom, K. L, Martin, D. D. & Fine, G. A. (2010). *Symbols, Selves, and Social Reality: A symbolic interactionist approach to social psychology and sociology*. New York: Oxford.
- Scott, T., Mannion, R., Marshall, M. & Davies, H. (2003). Does organizational culture influence health care performance? A review of the evidence. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 8, 105-117.
- Soeters, J. & Manigart, P. (Eds.) (2009). *Military Cooperation in Multinational Peace Operations*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorisation theory*. London: Blackwell.
- Vander biesen, I. (2009). Social and inter-cultural relations in nineteenth century Zanzibar: Dressed identity. *African and Asian Studies*, 8, 309-331.
- Williams, R. H. (2000). Promise Keepers: A comment on religion and social movements. *Sociology of Religion*, 61, 1-10.