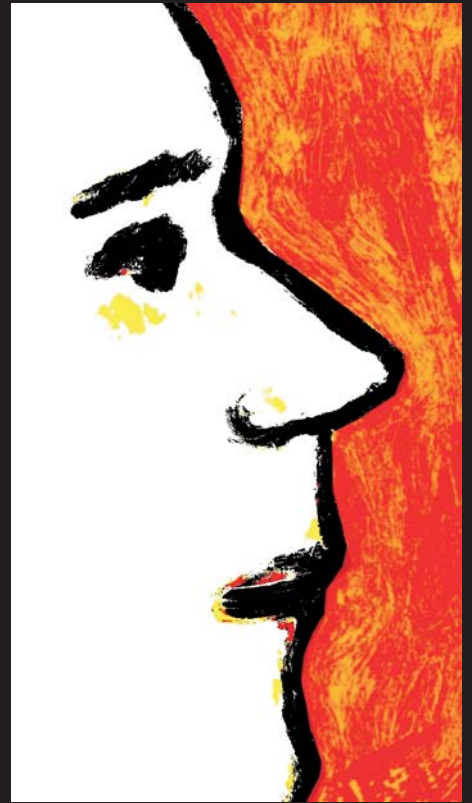


WHAT IS **ETHNIC CONFLICT**?



In the same series:

“What is Conflict?”

“What is Interpersonal Communication?”

“What is Negotiation?”

“What is Facilitation?”

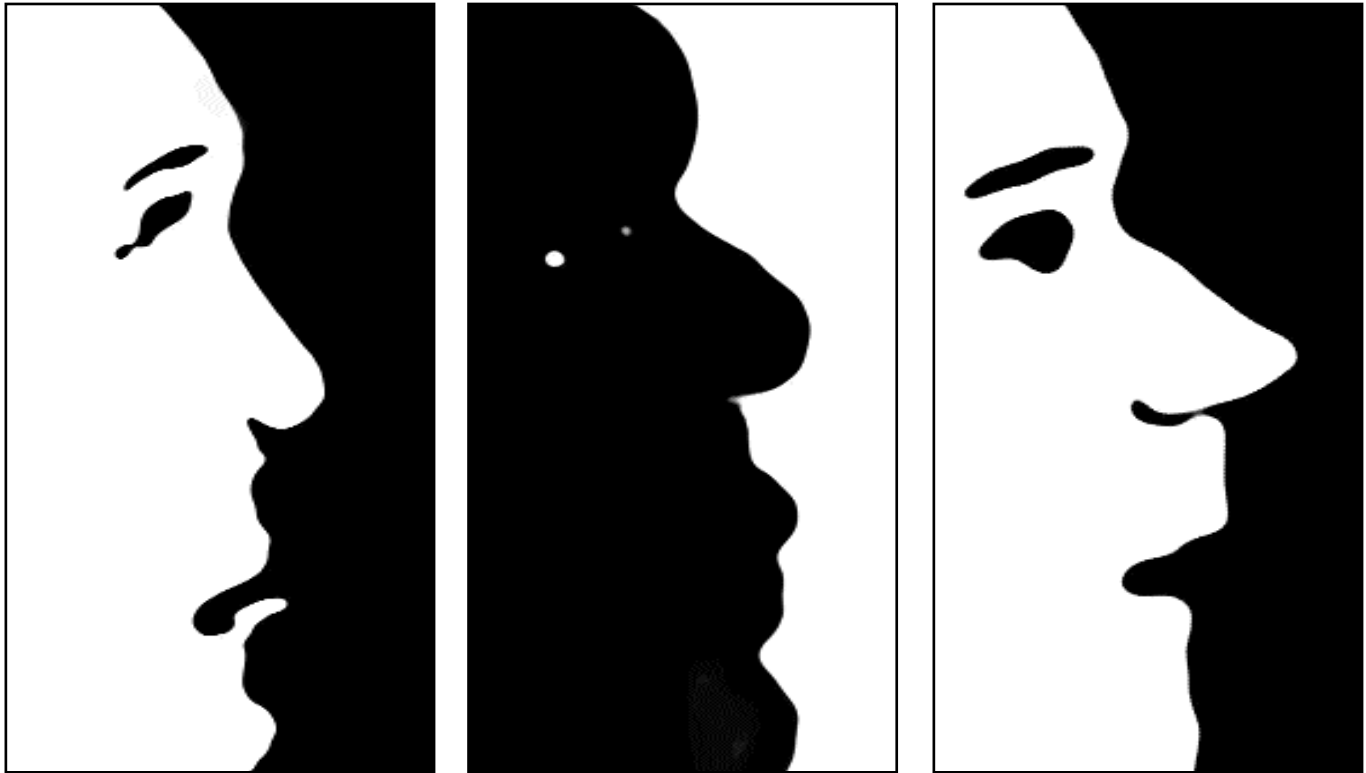
This Brochure was developed by Partners Foundation for Local Development - FPD, in the frame of the project "Capacity Building in Conflict Analysis and Resolution", ROM/00/002, financed by United Nations Development Program - UNDP Romania Country Office and United Nations Department for Economic and Social Problems - UN DESA, New York.

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Elaborated by Ana Vasilache
Graphics and layout by Nadina Pascariu

WHAT IS ETHNIC CONFLICT?

The Conflict having roots in the differences that shape our ethnic identities.



Our journey of understanding what is ethnic conflict will drive us through the following conceptual map:

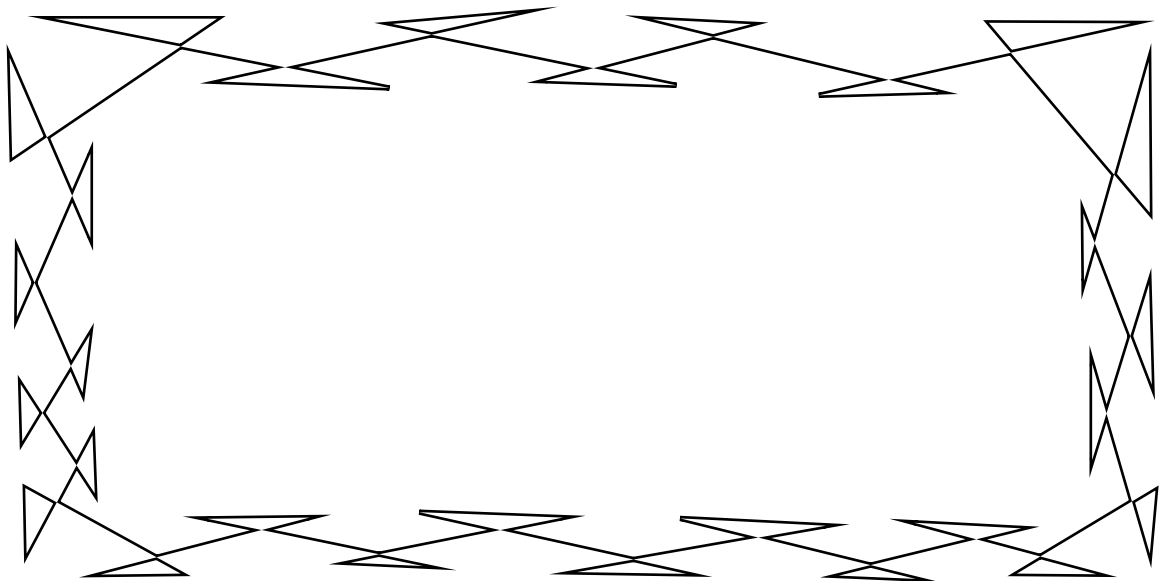
- A. Understanding Ethnicity 3
- B. Understanding Ethnic Conflict Causes 16
- C. Understanding why Ethnic Conflicts are difficult to manage 25

Our journey will end with some answers to the question that probably will come to your mind after deepening your understanding:

- D. So, what can we do? 28

A.UNDERSTANDING ETHNICITY

What comes to your mind when you hear the concept ethnicity?
Write down words that come to your mind:



Ethnicity is a complex concept and to understand it, is important to know more about:

- What is an Ethnic Group 4
- How do we define our Individual and Group Identity 5
- How do we define our Ethnic Identity 8
- How is our Ethnic Identity Evolving 10
- What types of Relations exist between Ethnic Groups 12

What is an Ethnic Group?

The adjective ethnic is derived from the Greek noun *ethnos*, which means race, people, nation or tribe. Today it means primarily people.

The ethnic group is defined as a group of people who share one or more of the following characteristics: language, kinship, ancestry, race, culture, religion, history, and/or physical appearance.

Ethnic group characteristics could be categorized as visible and non-visible.

visible characteristics



- Body characteristics such as (a) birth-determined skin and hair color, physiognomy, height and body shape (b) other physical signs that are not determined at birth, but linked with traditions or religious norms;
- Behavioral characteristics such as posture, gestures, way of communicating, way of dressing etc.

non-visible characteristics



- Language, vocabulary and accent;
- Names, food and other cultural norms, traditions, values.

In different situations one or more of these ethnic markers prevail when defining the ethnic group.

People form ethnic groups to address their need for identity and security, based on kinship relations and shared memories of common ancestry, common enemies - who define who they are not, common myths of glories and traumas.

Ethnic groups are often compared with an inverted refrigerator. The refrigerator generates inward coldness, but creates outward warmth. Ethnic groups create inward warmth for their members but also outward coldness, in order to be able to do so.

How do we define our Individual and Group Identity

Ethnicity is one important aspect of our individual identity, our sense of self.

Every man is in certain respect:

- (a) Like all other men;
- (b) Like some other men;
- (c) Like no other men.

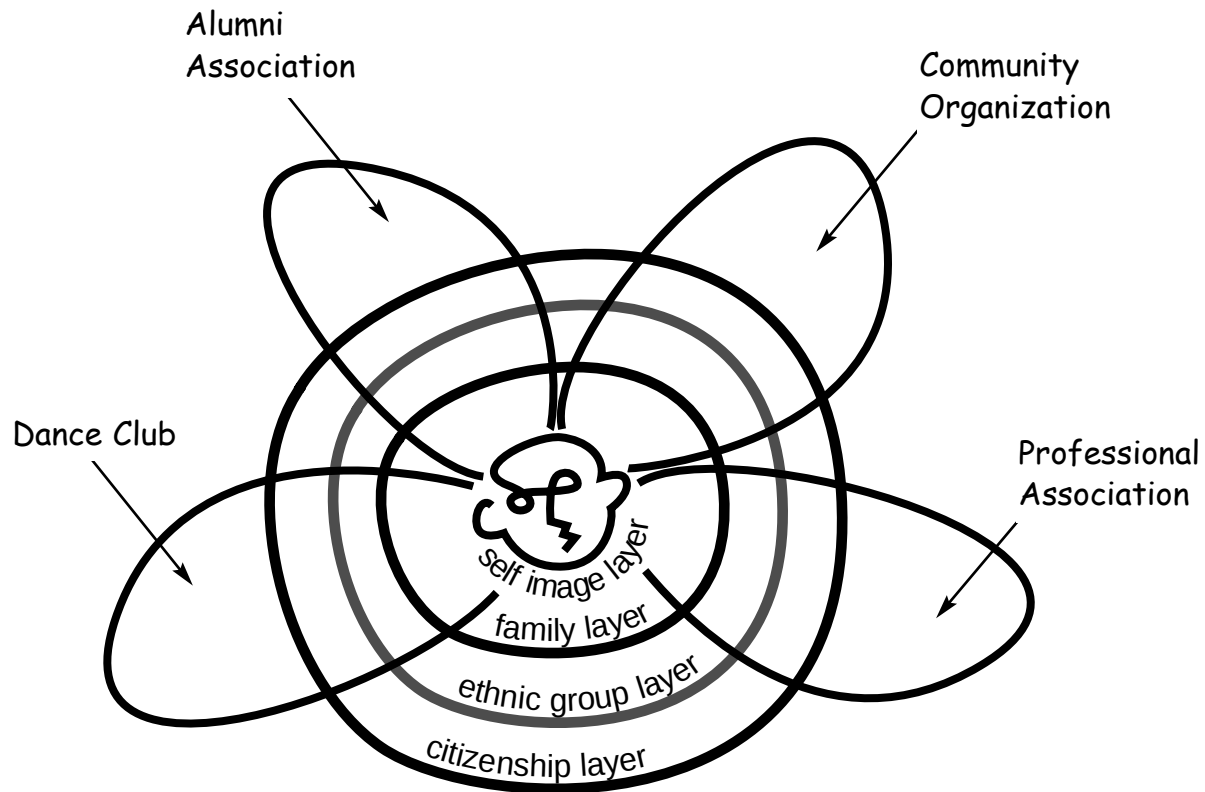
That means that (a) there are many characteristics that human beings share with all members of the species and (c) there are also ways in which every individual is unique. The level (b) is important for understanding human groups, and among them, ethnic groups, because draws attention to the characteristics which human beings share in common with certain other human beings, forming groups they can relate to as "we".

Probably in the very early stages of human social development when people said "we" they only referred to the small and isolated group of people in which they lived. Today, when people say "we" they refer to diverse and bigger groups of people and the tendency is that these groups become larger and larger.

One person can have multiple identities and can feel belonging simultaneously to more than one group about whom he/she refers to as "we". These different groups are defined as the person's layers of identity.

The symbolic image of individual layers of identity is one of an egocentric planetary system with the person's self-image in the center and other layers of identity ranging in orbits outward the distant Pluto of humanity citizenship. But going across ethnic, family or citizenship identities, a person can belong to groups based on common professions, cultural or sport activities, business or community interests.

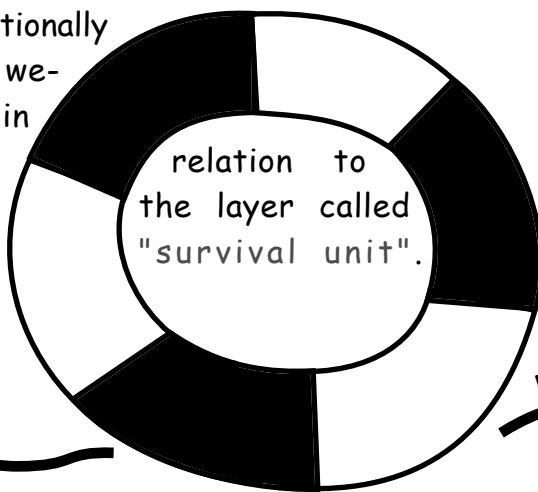
REMEMBER THIS IMAGE TILL THE END OF OUR JOURNEY WHEN WE WILL
SPEAK ABOUT WHAT TO DO IN ORDER TO PREVENT ETHNIC CONFLICTS
ESCALATION INTO VIOLENCE!



What about you?
What are your layers of identity?
Draw them!

What is the layer of identity toward which people feel the greatest emotional identification?

One hypothesis is that people have the most emotionally charged we-images in



Survival unit is the layer, the social organization, which meets the most significant proportion of its members' basic human needs for physical and/or spiritual survival - food, shelter, clothing, protection, recognition, love or self-esteem.

What is your "survival unit"? Identify it!

This theory could explain some of the reasons behind the ethnic conflicts that challenged the formerly communist countries in the last decade. The disintegration of the states social fabric and the resulting chaos, made people feel insecure. They lost their survival unit - the citizenship of a state no more capable of addressing their basic needs. People tried to find new social organizations that will help them be more secure and compete for the new positions of power and profit, and identified their ethnic group as their survival unit. Ethnic groups easier addressed their needs for family-like ties, for emotional support and reciprocal help.

In that way many conflict lines coincided with the ethnic group lines. And the numerous conflicts, the old suppressed ones and the new ones generated by the transition period, became conflicts between ethnic groups, much more difficult to manage and solve.

How do we define our Ethnic Identity?

Our ethnic affiliation belongs to a continuum line where at one end is the affiliation that we receive through our Birth and at the other end, the affiliation we decide upon by our Choice.

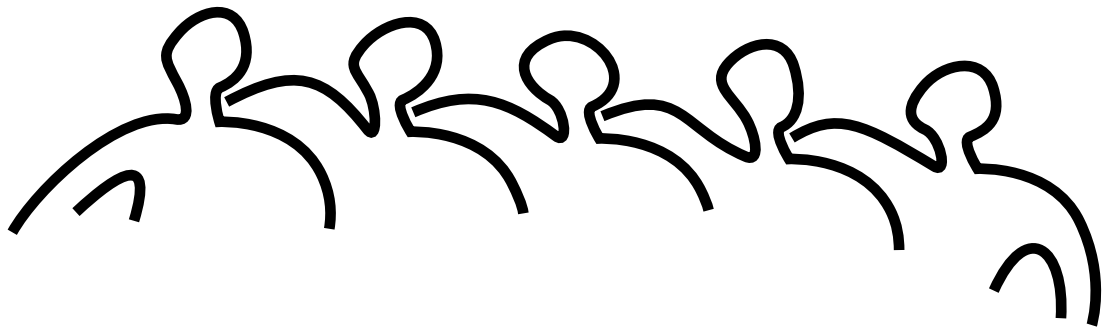
We can define our ethnic affiliation at various points along this Birth-Choice continuum line. But our Choice to be valid must be accepted by the other group's members. That is why, in many cases, ethnic affiliation is determined by our Birth.

The primacy of Birth makes ethnicity alike to kinship.

Ethnic groups are considered to be the largest social structures that can still offer kinship experience, family-like rights and obligations, and family-like emotions, such as love, acceptance and empathy. Ethnicity and kinship, both, can offer:

- Solidarity in times of stress and support in times of need;
- Intimacy and security in social relations;
- Predictability of behavior when meeting unknown people.

Ethnic group members call often each other brothers and harmonious relationships are referred to as brotherhood.



In the Western cultures the Birth principles signifying feudal immobility and centralized autocracy have been abolished and replaced by the principles of freedom-equality-fraternity, based on the individualistic philosophical assumption that the unit of action is the individual who is having the freedom to chose alternative affiliations based on religion, class, profession or language. All these alternative identities decrease the importance of ethnic affiliations and weaken the ties among extended family members. We can survive and climb the social ladder without their support.

However, in Western cultures, ethnicity and ethnic groups are not disappearing. The principles of individualism, of equality and freedom, are very weak when it comes to building community bonds or when responding to the needs of security and solidarity, in times of stress and crisis. It is there when ethnicity comes in as a community organizing principle, supplementing the weak bonds of the egalitarian individualism.

In countries belonging to Eastern types of cultures, the more or less extended families are the norm. Extended families are helping their members, offering security and predictability in unstable situations when the laws and norms, the impersonal criteria, are not expected to be applied. Strong family ties maintain the strong sense of ethnic identity. These include mainly marriages within the group, in order to maintain the Birth basis of ethnicity. Outsiders may perceive the wide network of extended families and their relations, as discrimination and favoritism.



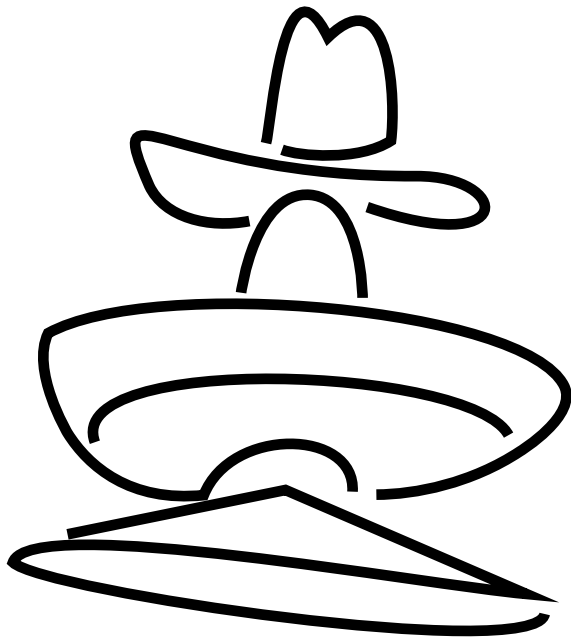
How is our Ethnic Identity Evolving

The ethnic identity is formed through a dynamic process. As a person matures, the perception of ethnicity undergoes profound transformations, along the cognitive development process.

Between the age of 2 and 7, children strongly identify with the group perceived as their own, while rejecting those seen as different. Unfortunately many adults do not outgrow this stage.

Knowledge and rational thinking brings more tolerance, empathy and understanding toward the "others" viewed as different.

Ethnicity initially experienced as a set of physical attributes becomes a mental construct including language, customs, cultural and historical facts, and general knowledge about own ethnic group.



Some people, in different moments of their lifetime, can shift from one ethnic group to another by:

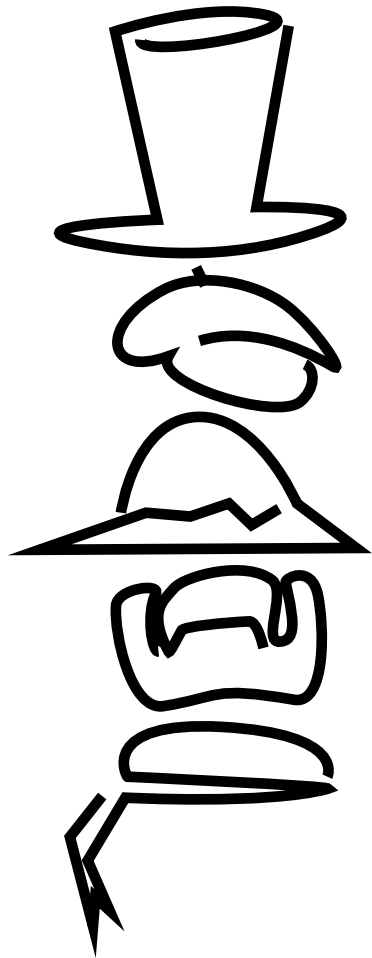
- Adjusting their identities when their former ethnic group divided into sub-groups;
- Assimilation into a larger ethnic group;
- Changing the ethnic group they belong to.

Many reasons, from political or economic, to emotional or social needs, can motivate individuals or groups to shift their ethnic identities. They can do it on their own will or under the pressure of events.

Ethnic identities evolve also through many generations' life times. Cultural movements can shape and reshape ethnic groups' identity boundaries.

An ethnic group in danger of being fragmented into subgroups might react by reinforcing elements of common culture and common ancestry, suppressing for example, differences in dialect or stressing descent from a single ancestor. Ethnic groups in danger of losing their distinctive identity by absorption into another larger group might respond by emphasizing their cultural uniqueness, selectively recalling ancient glories, resuscitating all that distinguish them from others, destroying all that link them to others. These are the cultural movements of assimilation or differentiation, which support ethnic boundaries maintenance, change or reconstruction.

These movements impact can be measured in decades, for the change to happen, it implies reorientation of collective religious, linguistic or historical beliefs and practices. One sociologist estimated that full assimilation of different ethnic groups could take between 300 and 700 years.



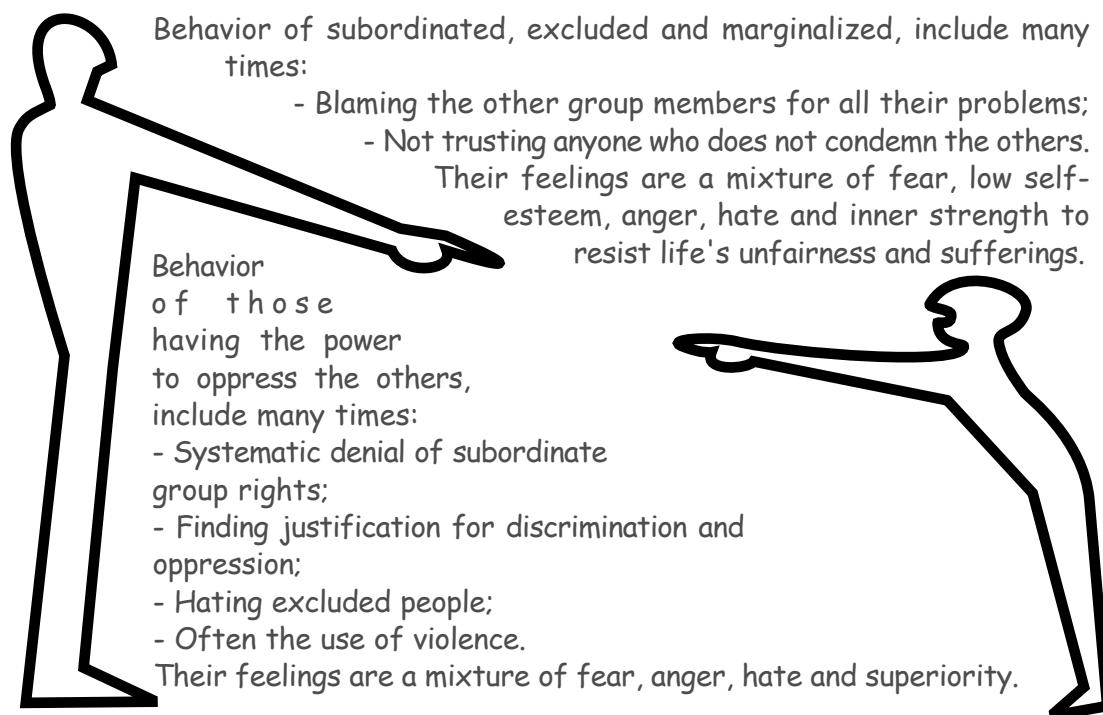
What types of Relations exist between Ethnic Groups

Ethnic groups can be, in relation to each other, in ranked or unranked types of relations.

(a) Ranked ethnic groups

When ethnicity borders are overlapping with power and social class borders we define the ethnic groups as ranked (ranked above one another). Ranked ethnic groups are ordered in a social hierarchy, one ethnic group having the monopoly of power and the other ethnic group deprived of the most types of power, living in poverty and ignorance. Mobility is restricted from one group to another and the unequal distribution of resources is reinforced by a set of behavioral prescriptions and prohibitions. Religion plays an important role in legitimizing this hierarchy. Ethnic conflict in ranked systems has social class coloration, because ethnic groups largely coincide with the class lines.

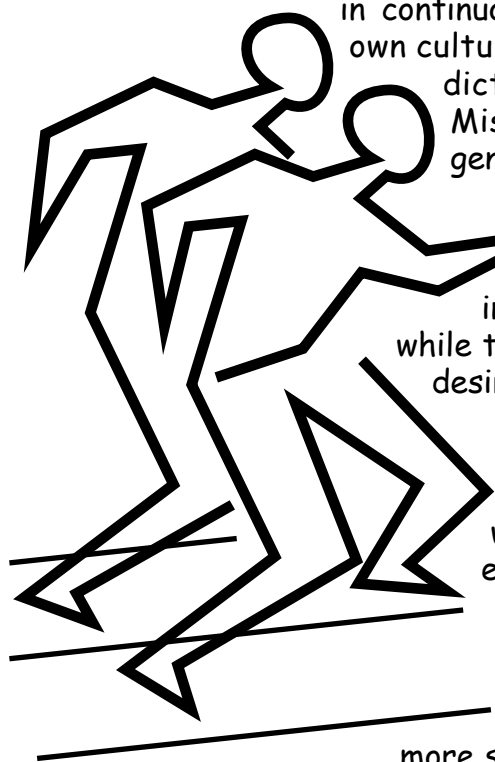
The general stereotype about the subordinate, excluded group depicts it as slow, violent, lazy, unmannered and dirty. Indeed, such groups often do the dirty work.



On a global scale ethnic subordination is on the decline, eroded by the spread of universalistic, egalitarian, achievement-oriented values, and by the diffusion of education. International legal frame and policies promoting the universal human rights concepts, are trying to bring practice into line with egalitarian and inclusive ideology.

(b) Unranked ethnic groups

Unranked groups exist in parallel, each having its own social stratifications. They are in continuous competition trying to affirm the superiority of own culture. Relations among unranked groups are not as predictable as those among ranked groups. Misunderstandings and misperceptions abound. In general, unranked groups live on the same territory as a result of migrations and incomplete conquests, and each of them has lingering historical grievances: the group whose conquest has been incomplete nourishes unfulfilled territorial ambitions, while the group whose land has been partly conquered has a desire for revenge.



Unranked groups have a serious potential for conflict and violence. When violence occurs unranked groups want sovereign autonomy, the exclusion of parallel ethnic groups from the share of power or reversion to an idealized, ethnically homogenous status quo ante.

But unranked groups have also a great potential to develop into societies where ethnic divisions are no more significant.

In a given country there may be numerous ethnic groups, some ranked in relation to each other and some unranked. The distinction between the two types of relations - ranked and unranked - is important for the correct understanding of ethnic conflict causes and the identification of solutions to address them.

History shows that multi-ethnic societies, with ranked or unranked groups, searched for structures able to secure social stability and order. Sociology identified three basic models of social organization of multiethnic societies:

1. Segregation
2. Integration
3. Coexistence

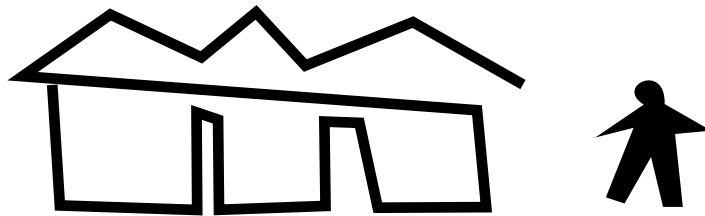
The Segregation Model

One ethnic group has the monopoly of economic, political, cultural, and social power. This group imposes its own culture over the other groups, and does not accept or recognize their rights to be different.

The following strategies are used to keep the status quo:

- **LEGAL AND PHYSICAL SEPARATION:** social contacts are forbidden among the ruling group and the others, stereotypes are transmitted and reinforced through education and tradition, institutions and legal frames are created to control the situation and keep it stable;
- **DESTRUCTION:** everything not belonging to the ruling culture is destroyed by killings or deportations.

History shows that many segregated societies ended up in clashes and violence.



The Integration Model

One ethnic group dominates so that a mono-cultural, homogenous society is built. The dominant group persuades the other groups on the advantages of accepting losses for greater gains. Two types of strategies are used:

- **ASSIMILATION:** the ruling group makes deliberate efforts to re-socialize and change the other groups' cultures, integrating them into their own culture. The other ethnic groups accept;

- **RECOGNITION:** the ruling group allows full linguistic and cultural autonomy for all ethnic groups. But encourages the establishment of parallel societies with very few contacts with each other. In order to keep the social cohesion and stability this strategy functions if a) it is implemented by authoritarian systems with strong and charismatic leaders respected by all ethnic groups or (b) it is implemented by democratic systems in which all ethnic groups find a new homogeneity by renouncing to some of their differences.



The Coexistence Model

In this model no one group is dominant or has the monopoly of power. Diverse groups cooperate to achieve common interests, sharing power and resources. The society norms accept and respect each other's uniqueness and rights, in the frame of common norms of citizenship behavior. Groups accept each other and maintain their own culture. The system of decision-making is decentralized at grass roots level and there are strong networks beyond ethnic groups (such as professional networks). The society is administered through a bi or multi-lingual system.

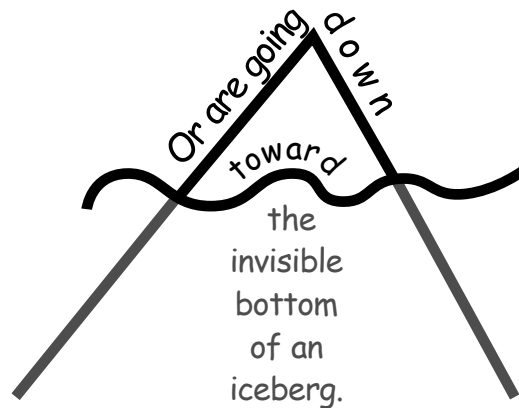
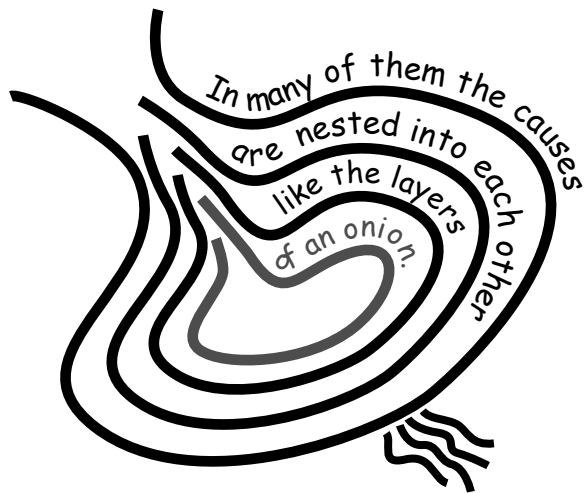
Societies that are organized on the coexistence model should be based on flexible and inclusive ideologies that promote cooperation, decisions taken by consensus and participation of all. Promotion of a closed and exclusive ideology is dangerous: may create disagreements and social turbulence.



B.UNDERSTANDING ETHNIC CONFLICT CAUSES

The potential of conflict to generate learning, stimulate creativity and deepen relationships is realized only if we are able to understand its underlying causes and to mutually recognize and respect each other right to address own needs.

Identifying conflict causes, and specifically ethnic conflict causes, is one of the most difficult tasks. Researchers developed different models.



And always in the middle core or deep under the water, we can find the underlying causes generated by our human nature and its basic needs.

Human Basic Needs

But what are the Human Basic Needs?

At this point is little agreement if human basic needs are universal or are culturally determined, about how a list of human basic needs should look and how these needs should be ordered. Are some needs more important than others?

Anyway, it is considered that the needs for identity, security, self-esteem or recognition are critical in many conflicts, especially ethnic conflicts.

So it may be useful to look at some of the theories trying to identify and rank the Human Basic Needs.

The renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow made a hierarchy of the Human Basic Needs and he says that each lower need has to be met before moving to the next higher level. People first look to satisfy their **Physical Needs to Survive** - they need shelter, food, water, warmth, and sex. They need **Security** - to be out of danger and fear, to be able to satisfy their physical needs. They have **Social Needs** - they need to interact with other people and to have close, friendly relations, to belong and be included in a group, to love and be loved. They have a need for **Esteem** - to be well regarded and appreciated by others, as well as by themselves. They have **Self-actualization Needs** - they need to have achievements, to win power, to realize own potential and identity.



Johan Galtung describes four classes of Human Basic Needs meaningful for many cultures:

- Survival, as opposed to death - individually or collectively;
- Well-being, essentially meaning food, clothes, shelter, health;
- Identity, meaning something that differentiate us from others and is worth to live for - values and principles, culture;
- Freedom, meaning having choices over the first three.

The Human Basic Needs that are recognized through international legal documents are the Human Rights.

Positions, Interests and Human Basic Needs

A conflict usually begins with a request, a demand or an accusation. These are in conflict resolution terminology "positions" and at the first glance they may be considered the conflict causes. But positions are only incompatible and clashing solutions that parties in conflict perceive addressing their interests and basic needs.

Two sisters are fighting over an orange. They are in conflict because their positions are incompatible: both of them want the same orange. If the conflict remains at the level of positions, three outcomes are possible:

- (a) One girl takes the orange, one girl has 100% of what she wanted, the other 0%;
- (b) Girls split the orange, each girl have 50% of what they wanted;
- (c) Girls reach an impasse and are not able to reach any agreement; each of them has 0% of what they wanted.

You may recognize the types of outcomes: win-lose, compromise and lose-lose.

However they can begin to search for what is behind their positions. They can ask each other "Why do you want this orange?" in order to find out their underlying interests. Answering the question, it may turn out that they have different interests: one girl may want the orange because she wants to eat it; the other may want the orange skin to make a cake. The interests are different but compatible. Now the conflict has a solution that satisfies 100% each side interest: one girl takes the orange meat, the other takes the orange skin. This is a win/win outcome.

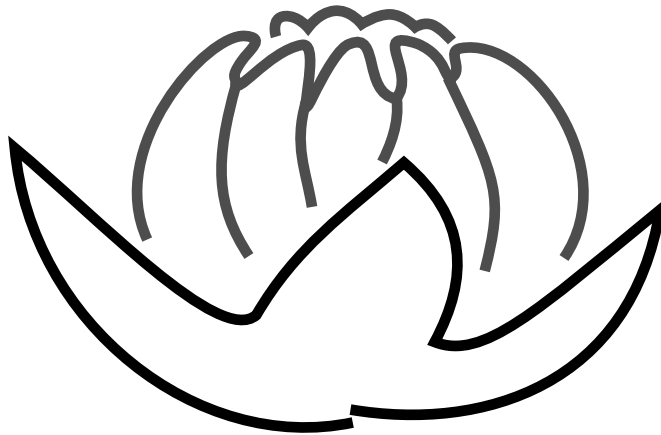
18 Two states wanting the same land or two nations wanting the same state, sounds famil-

iar? The conflict is as old as human kind. Competition and fight over scarce resources, or what are perceived as scarce resources, are very often the starting positions in the conflicts between different ethnic groups.

"Winner-takes-it-all" competitive approaches transform these conflicts in long-term deadly fights ended from time to time by short periods of dominance that leave one party with the desire for revenge, or periods of compromise that really do not satisfy parties, and are used by both sides to prepare for the next fight.

As in the story of the two girls fighting over one orange, if parties would have the skills to approach the conflict in a collaborative way, searching for, expressing and acknowledging, their underlying interests and needs, they might find out that they want the same resource but for different reasons. We need to exchange information. We need to ask questions and listen carefully to the answers. We need to see and understand beyond the words. *We need to communicate.*

Unfortunately, we have to struggle with an imperfect system of communication, containing considerable opportunities for breakdowns that are often the very causes of the conflict or the causes of its difficult resolution.



Interpersonal Communication

Perceptions mechanism

Different people perceive the same reality differently. Through the mechanism of perceptions, our minds form our reality through the following mechanism:

- We collect information - but we collect only a limited amount, in a selective way and in a certain order; we may collect different information also;
- We arrange the information into categories - but with categories go a certain set of assumptions or predictions that could be very different also;
- We conclude and form our reality - and no wonder that we arrive having different realities, with differences that matter and are often cause of misunderstandings and conflicts.

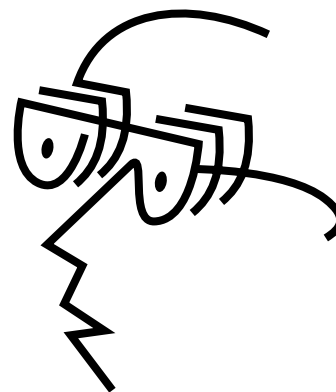
Our life experiences, education, principles and values, our ethnic and cultural "lenses" influence each step of the perceptions formation.

Cultural lenses

People vary greatly in deeply held values and attitudes and if not understood and respected, the differences become sources of difficult communication and conflicts resistant to resolution.

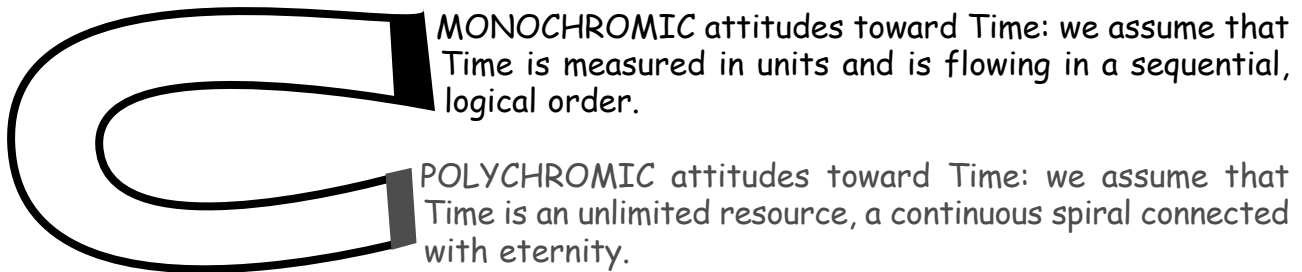
The following communication patterns of different ethnic groups have been studied in order to identify commonalities and explain differences:

- **The degree of emotions expressed;**
- **Directness/indirectness of questions and answers;**
- **Eye contact;**
- **Gestures;**
- **Identity orientation;**
- **Turn taking and pause time when speaking;**
- **Space;**
- **Time perception;**
- **Touch;**
- **Vocal patterns.**

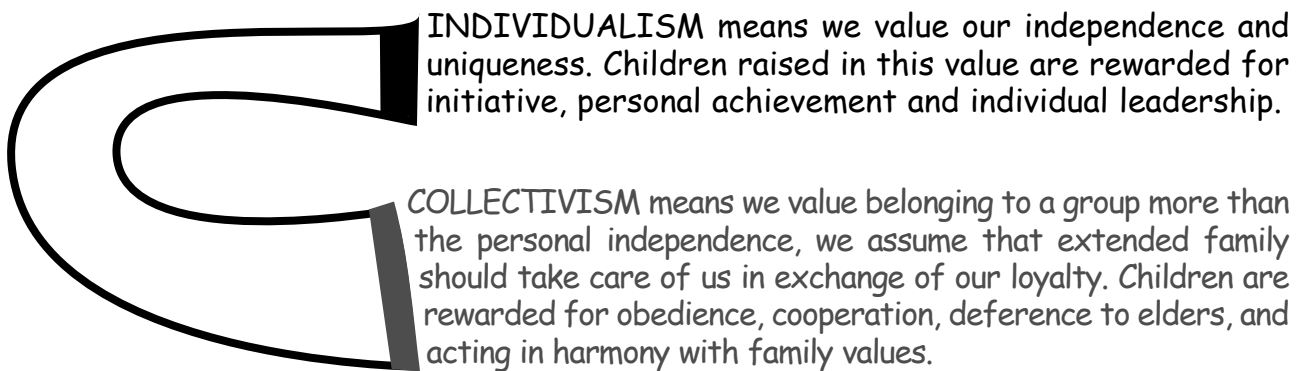


There are also other cultural dimensions that may influence our lenses defined by 2 extreme attitudes.

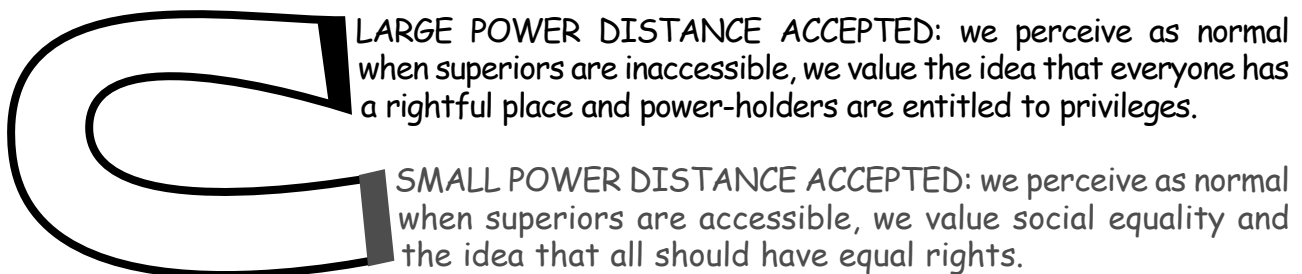
HOW WE VALUE TIME



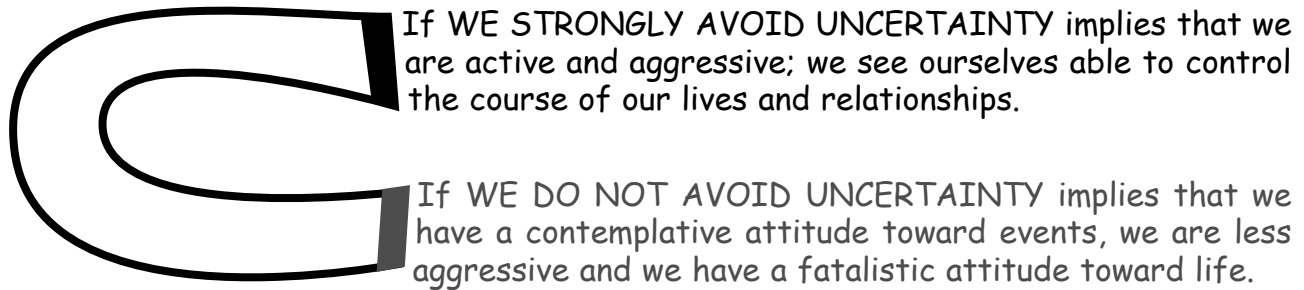
HOW WE VALUE THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE SOCIETY



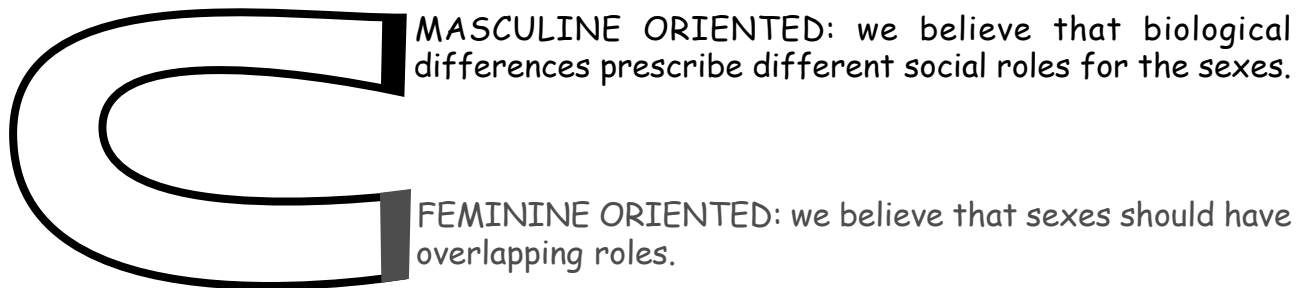
HOW WE HANDLE THE POWER DISTANCE - the differences in authority, status and wealth



HOW WE HANDLE THE RISKS INHERENT IN THE FUTURE



HOW WE HANDLE SEX ROLE DIVISION



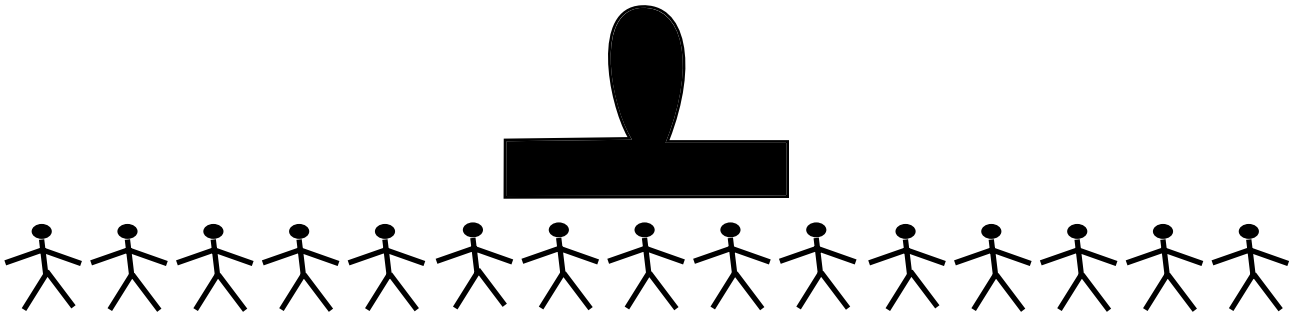
Usually our values and beliefs cannot be negotiated, nor can they be changed by rational and persuasive arguments. They are often expressed through positions taken toward symbols, such as the status of languages, the names of towns and states, the identity of persons in honorific positions, national flags and anthems. These positions may become significant conflict causes in divided societies.

Knowledge of the cultural/ethnic dimensions can help us understand the values and needs that may underlie positions, be tolerant with people who are different from us, learn new perspectives, find ways to control and modify our behavior through personal development.

Behaviors

Our behavior, determined by stereotypes and prejudices is often the cause of miscommunication and conflicts, especially ethnic conflicts.

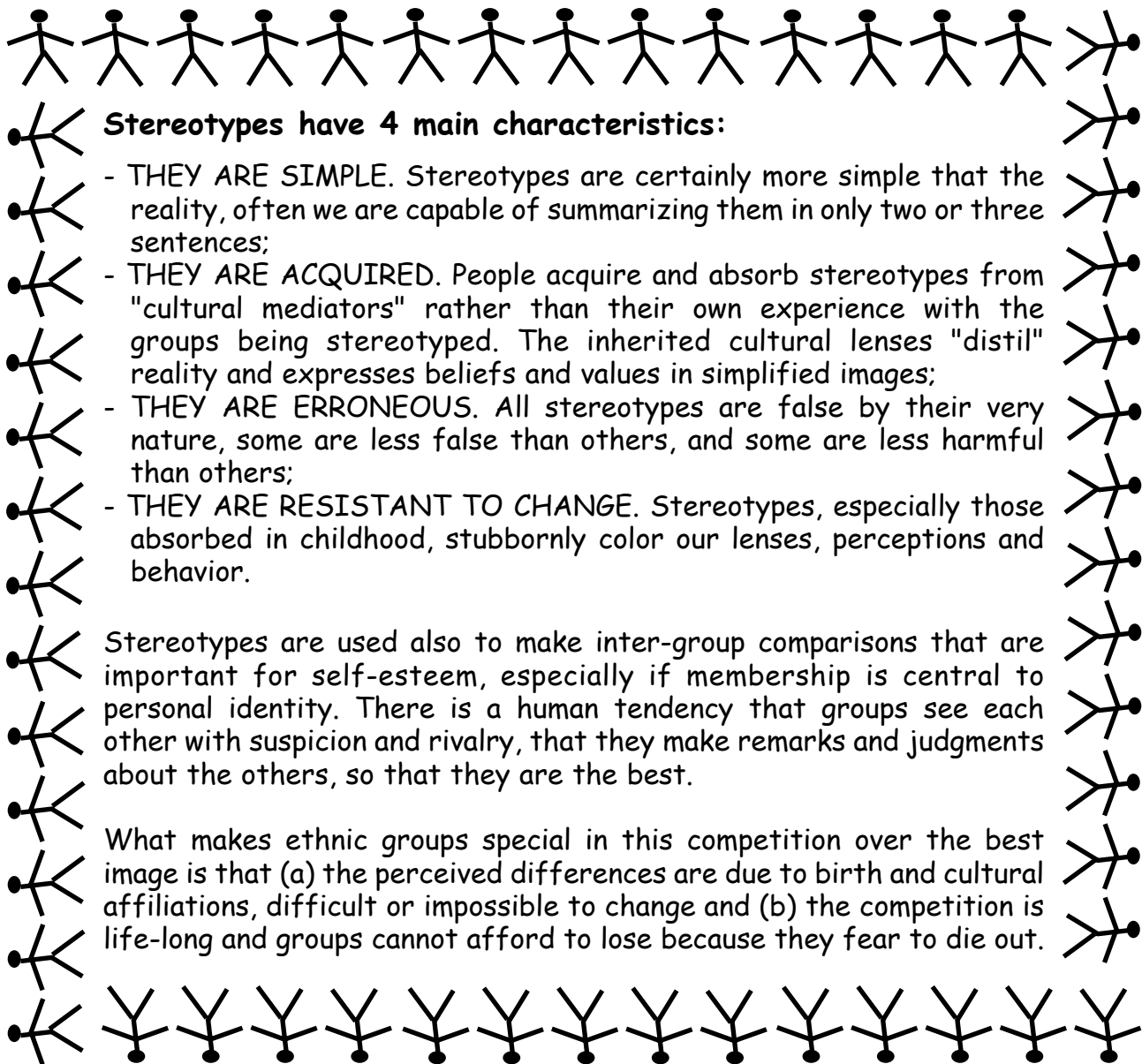
The term stereotype initially referred to a printing stamp, which was used to make multiple copies from a single mould. The great journalist Walter Lippmann adopted the term as a mean of describing the way society categorized - stamped - human beings with a set of characteristics.



Stereotyping is a natural function of the human mind and it is aimed to simplify the complex reality and make our body and mind to develop automat responses to similar stimuli and attenuate the anxiety vis-à-vis the unknown. Stereotyping in social relations has a useful function by classifying individuals and helping us predict their behavior and plan our reactions.

But stereotyping is dangerous, because we simplify in our thinking the complex human reality that make people unique. When stereotyping, we often fill in the knowledge blanks with information from our own cultural databanks. But the more those we observe are culturally different from us, the more likely we are to be wrong.

Ethnic stereotypes frequently leads to prejudices, negative behaviors formed by bad actions and ugly emotions. Prejudices based on the oversimplification of any race of people into narrow, negative stereotypes can have tragic consequences, such as discrimination, violence and in extreme cases, genocide.



C.UNDERSTANDING WHY ETHNIC CONFLICTS ARE DIFFICULT TO MANAGE

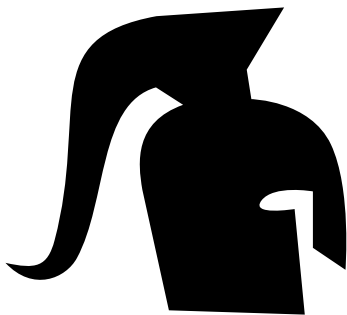
The basic needs for survival, identity, belonging and recognition, are not negotiable

If basic needs are threatened or are neglected a long period of time, the results could be violent reactions. People do not compromise over fundamental needs and values. People are ready to die or to kill, if put in a conflict situation that threatens (or perceived as threatening) their survival or their identity, requiring from them to change or deny it, as a condition for survival.

Members of ethnic groups in violent conflicts perceive themselves being engaged in heroic acts of self-defense against life and death threats. They often overestimate the dangers they face or misperceive the intentions and actions of their enemies.

Ethnic groups engaged in violent conflicts justify killings in the name of self-defense or punishment for wrongdoings. According to this logic the killing is not subject of moral judgment, those engaged in violence don't think they are attacking, they think they are responding: "They are killing us, therefore we may kill them".

Many times cultures justify violence as good and killings as right, even sacred (holy war) and beautiful. Sounds familiar?



"We have a golden, very distant past and a glorious future to fight for!"

"We are exceptional, higher forces chose our group, we have a special mission in this world."

"The world is divided sharply into two (we and the rest of the world): the good and the evil, and the struggle between good and evil is irreconcilable."

People use often force-based solutions to solve their conflict

Ethnic conflict escalates rapidly into violence. Due to cultural/value differences, ethnic groups may not only disagree about the substance of a dispute but also about the appropriate method of dispute resolution. Given the lack of agreement on both substance and process, parties tend to turn very often and easily to force-based options, because force seems to be the only common language that both sides understand and honor.

Ethnic violence is most likely to occur when (a) ethnic antipathy is present, (b) a precipitating event creates an emotional reaction of anger and hate, (c) parties assess as very low the risks of law enforcement by the public authorities or (d) one party has the backing of these authorities.

Ethnic antipathy makes anger-producing events to be seen as acts of the entire group, not just of individuals, making possible indiscriminate violence against members of the same ethnic group. The groups in conflict do not care if the member of the hated group is a good person or not, just that he or she is a member of targeted ethnic group.

The more severely divided societies, the bigger is the amount of accumulated anger that takes the form of explosive violence. Anger always opens the possibility of action greater than its cause.



Many ethnic conflicts seem not to have a win-win solution

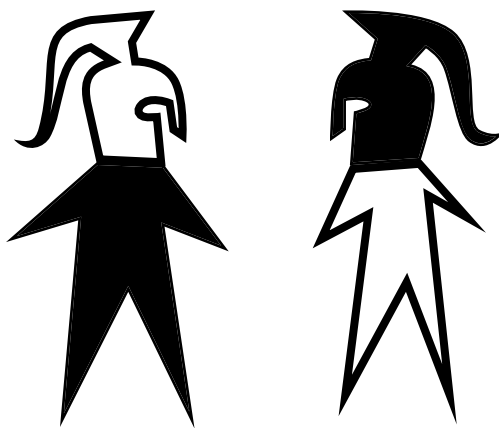
Sometimes if one value is followed another is threatened; if one nation controls a piece of land, another does not; if one group is dominant, another is subordinate. While sharing is possible in theory, often-opposing sides see a shared solution as a loss.

Communication between disputants is burdened by intense emotions

This is especially true where previous history of violence and confrontation weather five years ago or one thousand years ago, makes opposing parties to act irrationally under the influence of intense negative emotions such as distrust, hate and fear. Fear produces anger - directed toward groups believed to be dangerous and to possess threatening characteristics. All these negative emotions contribute to the brutality and magnitude of the ethnic conflicts violence.

These emotions are sometimes so ingrained that opposing parties cannot imagine living with or working cooperatively with one another.

One of the most dangerous process that take place during conflict escalation is the dehumanization process: parties begin to view each other as less than human, thus not deserving human treatment. Dehumanization is the last stage of "developing the enemy image" process, developing a negative oversimplified stereotype about opponents as evils and a positive oversimplified image about owns side as entirely good. Everything is black and white, gray does not exist: one's own faults or enemy values are discounted, denied or ignored. Dehumanization makes possible for parties to engage in violence, to hurt each other and to violate the generally accepted norms of behavior regarding one's fellow man.

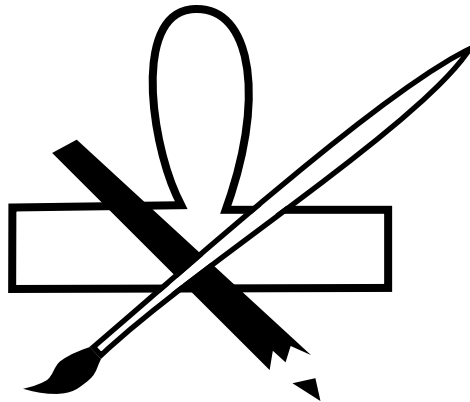


D.SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?

What we must prevent or at least reduce is violence not conflict. We must learn how to clash as civilized creatures, not as conflict illiterates. If more human beings would be trained in handling conflict constructively we probably can reduce violence and provide new non-violent means to achieve human goals.

What can we do to reduce or eliminate stereotypes in our lives?

- Focus on every person as an individual. Each one of us deserves to be considered a unique human being;
- Become more aware of stereotypes and how they interfere with our ability to interact with other people. Understanding the nature of stereotypes and prejudices is the first step to combating them;
- Remember that there could be more differences inside a group than among groups;
- Recognize that we are all part of many groups, none of which can totally explain who we are;
- Learn to look at things from the other's point of view;
- Adopt a more humble attitude about the accuracy of our judgments;
- Be willing to learn more about the culture and background of people different from ourselves;
- Take opportunities to neutralize stereotypes when we hear them.



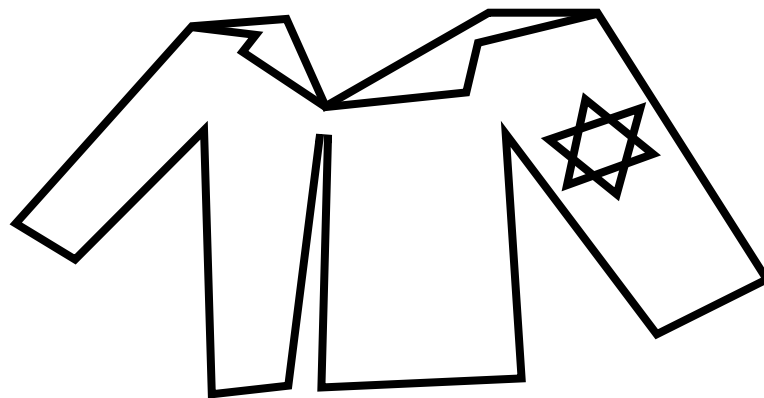
How can we react to stereotypes and prejudices in a more effective way?

- The response for a prejudicial action is most effective when it is taken not by the target person but by a person who belongs to the same group as the person taking prejudicial action;
- Removal of the passive support of prejudicial actions is essential for stopping them.

The message is clear: none of us can act for our own defense as effectively as the person who belongs to the group that has prejudices toward us.

Martin Nimoeller tells us his tragic experience from the WWII:

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I was a protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.



But why in some ethnically diverse communities the sparks that cause ethnic conflicts provoke virulent ethnic violence and in others only mild increased ethnic tensions?

Systematic research shows that the presence or the absence of pre-existing local networks of civic organizations between the ethnic groups in conflict is the single most important predictor of whether a community will respond violently or not, to ethnic provocations.

The most peaceful communities had local associations across ethnic lines, which members became aware of the ethnic violence dangers and worked to suppress the criminal elements interested in exploiting the ethnic conflict. These civic organizations were effective in killing rumors, improving communication, exerting pressure on violent elements at local level, resisting the polarizing activities of politicians in search of electoral advantages.

Less peaceful were communities in which the two ethnic groups interacted together in daily life but associations bridging ethnic divides did not exist or were weak. The most vulnerable communities to ethnic violence were those in which the two ethnic groups had little interaction, either on neighborhood or associational level.

We can make an analogy to seismology. If civil society in any given community is organized on inter-ethnic associational lines, there is a good chance it can sustain serious ethnic earthquakes - such as riots and killings, viewed on TV.

If, on the other hand, individual members of different ethnic groups within a community relate to each other only in the context of regular neighborhood interaction, earthquakes of a smaller intensity - such as police brutality against a particular ethnic group - can result in ethnic violence.

And if engagement among people within a community is only along intra-ethnic lines, then small tremors - such as unconfirmed rumors of clashes - can unleash the violence.

We want to ask you to go back to the drawing describing the individual layers of identity. Observe how in our symbolic image the layers that transgress the ethnic lines form a safety net that do not allow dramatic fractures along these lines, when conflict occurs.

In conclusion

A multi-ethnic society with few inter-connections across ethnic boundaries is very vulnerable to ethnic violence.

States should be proactive in preventing ethnic violence by supporting relationships building across ethnic lines and by promoting equal opportunities policies. But the reality shows that states (and politicians) are often failing to behave properly.

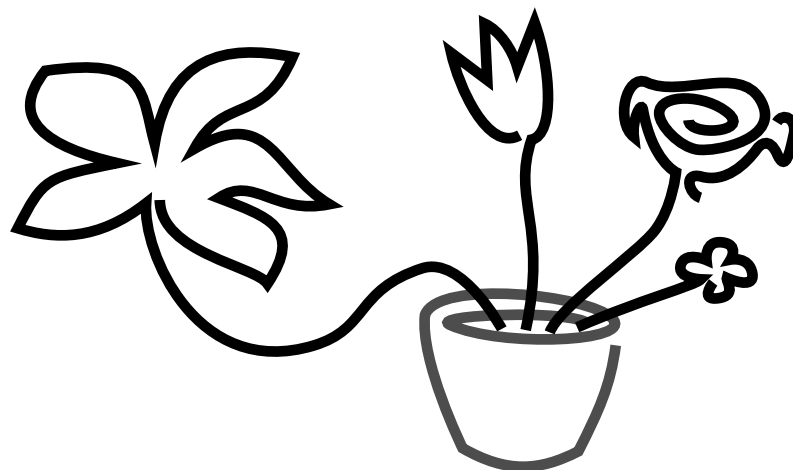
Developing civic life and building integrated civic networks could be more effective in preventing violence than trying to change states behavior. Civic organizations or groups that represent mutual political, economic or social interests across ethnic lines are effective in preventing violence.

Working together (or learning together) is one of the best ways to build a web of collaborative relationships and prevent violence.

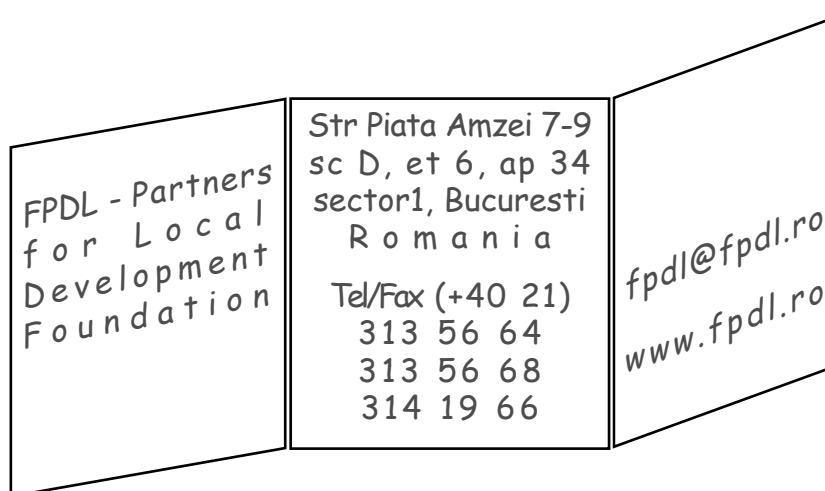
We may dream together with dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to live in a world free of stereotypes and prejudices:

"I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

To become reality, better worlds should be first in our dreams.



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