# Identity, Trauma and Othering: The Hidden Ingredients in Conflict

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*"All of the massacres that have taken place in recent years, like most of the bloody wars, have been linked to complex and long-standing 'cases' of identity ... for people directly involved in conflicts arising out of identity, for those who have suffered and been afraid, nothing else exists except 'them' and 'us,' the insult and the atonement."*

(Maalouf, 2001, p. 33)

## Introduction

Maalouf's stark statement articulates the three ingredients I will focus on as key to the formation and continuation of conflicts: identity, trauma (which he articulates as suffering and fear) and Othering (them and us). While he is referring to large, ongoing conflicts (e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) it is the contention here that these three ingredients, while often under the surface, are central to the "recipe" of any conflict.

If we view conflict like an iceberg, the set of "facts" that we see as the principle causes of an argument, struggle or conflict can be seen as the visible part of the iceberg, but we know that the mass that destroyed the Titanic is what we cannot see, or our "blind spots". This article is a beginning step in assisting the reader in understanding how these blind spots form so that we can deal with the whole "iceberg" present in conflict, not just the part that seems obvious to us.

## Identity

Identity, or "how we come to define ourselves" is layered and means many different things, from cultural, ethnic and religious identities, to our affinities for a particular place or specific interest. First, we will distinguish personal or "individual" and what is often referred to as "collective" identity (Alexander, 2004).

Personal identity, for our purposes here, is less about preferences or tastes, but rather experiences born out of cultural, ethnic, religious, family, moral and/or ethical values and beliefs for which one may feel a particular connection. These deep identifiers often play a major role in how we view ourselves, leading to how we may view a particular situation, alternate opinion, and, often most importantly, the person holding the alternate opinion.

Group or "collective identity", a natural outcropping of individual identity, forms when we bond with others of similar backgrounds and experiences. Collective identity creates a climate for collective remembering or "collective memory" (Halbwachs, 1924; Bernecker, 2008). Collective memory, also known as historical memory, refers to how a group coalesces around memories of particularly impactful events. Often, these are second-generation memories and retellings of historical events. Collective memory is disposed to articulating a filtered view of events that, consciously or unconsciously, benefits the group, often to the detriment of another.

**Trauma**

Trauma, from the Greek meaning "wound", refers to a "self-altering experience of violence and injury and harm" (Gilmore, 2001, pg. 130). In the context of conflict, these wounds can be the result of seemingly small slights, or life-altering traumas, but nonetheless work at a subterranean level and can manifest themselves in situations that are seemingly unrelated.

In day-to day "micro conflicts" (disagreements or hostile relationships between two people or a small group and usually of short duration), there may be wounds that are unhealed from previous interactions with each other, or they may have come from unrelated incidents. On a psychological level, similar to physical scars, "touching" them brings a heightened reaction. When we are engaged in a zero-sum gain argument (for one to win, the other must lose), we are most likely unaware of the workings of trauma, but instead we are focused on the wrong or harm that we feel the other is inflicting on us.

"Macro" conflicts, (protracted occurrences, usually between defined groups, ranging from bitter family disputes to full-scale wars), operate on a larger scale and often fester over a long period of time, but their genesis is similar to that of micro conflicts.

While the psychosocial study of trauma reaches well beyond the scope of this article, I will outline a couple of important facets of trauma. In both "micro" and macro" conflicts temporary pain caused by trauma (grief) may develop into what Freud referred to as a sustained wounding of the soul, which Freud called "mourning" (Freud, 1917/2006, p. 311). Mourning can be an important means of processing trauma, but it can also manifest itself in contested situations, creating an often emotional and/or physical reaction to past grief, reappearing in the present.

Trauma can foster, within individuals and groups, sensitivity to victimhood, to perceptions that past victimization makes present and future victimization more likely. Victimhood, or "victim beliefs" may further insulate individuals and groups from learning about and understanding those outside of the experience of another. In other words, to Other.

While this article deals with three prime ingredients that are present within conflicts, it is important to note that they work in conjunction with each other. Identity and trauma are often intertwined and are essential components in how one creates the Other.

**Othering**

The Other often refers to an oppressed Other, though I use it here more generally, as a person or group that is outside of "us"; it is our "them". In micro conflicts, in can be seen in terms of how we place another's views and/or experiences as "outsider" phenomena, as different or alien to our way of thinking. In macro conflicts, the Other, or "them" are the group of people who we hold responsible for our pain, struggle or circumstance. How we define the Other has, fortunately, shifted greatly in the last twenty or thirty years and continues to shift. A famous example of how anthropologists used to view the Other is Margaret Mead's study of Samoan women in the 1920's (Mead, 1928). Mead saw the Other as different based on a set of observable criteria. We now articulate the Other

and the act of Othering in a way that recognizes our role in creating it – which Mead and her contemporaries did not.

Powell and Menendian define Othering "a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities" (2016). This definition sees Othering as an action. In other words, no person or group is the "Other" until we speak or act in a manner that places "them" outside of "us".

Othering, it is important to note, is not the exclusive domain of fringe groups. We ALL Other. Othering is a part of defining self. Personal and group identity is formed, not just by defining who we are, but who we are not. The "us/them" paradigm is integral to how identity forms, both within individuals and groups. Othering, I offer, comes not from "not knowing" about the Other, but rather from a lack of awareness or even interest in discovering what we don't know we don't know. Valuing the Other begins when we become alert and concerned about what we cannot see, do not know and need to discover.

**Hidden From View - Our Blind Spots**

This idea of what we don't know we don't know is central to the question we are working with, how the three phenomena (identity, trauma and Othering) work together to form and entrench conflicts. A blind spot is hidden from our view, it is beyond what we have thought to question. While identity defines who we are (and who we are not), it is a complex and evolving process and involves conscious and unconscious decision-making. Trauma, or "wounds" can create a sense of victimhood where our past pain injects itself into a current challenge, but we are often unaware of how it is at work in us. Our traumatic experiences may create further distance between "us" and "them" as we naturally seek to protect ourselves from further pain. Othering, the thoughts and/or actions that place "them" outside of "us", is sadly a common protective mechanism, but can have dire consequences for the Other.

**Conclusion**

This article should be seen as painting the canvas with broad-brush strokes rather than fine detail. If one reads two historical accounts of an event, told from opposing perspectives, it can be easy to understand that retellings of events are subjective by nature. Similarly, the perspective we each bring to a contested situation is subjective. While this is not new news, what is not discussed is how this subjective view is formed and what is at work, beneath the surface. Returning to the iceberg metaphor, we pay a great deal of attention to what we can see, but tend to be oblivious to the potential harm that lurks beneath the surface.

In macro conflicts that become intractable (persistent over a long span of time with no clear solution or end-point) (Bar-Tal, 2008, 2011), the role of identity formation, trauma and Othering is magnified. As Maalouf (2001) suggests, "nothing else exists except 'them' and 'us,' the insult and the atonement" (p. 33). I suggest that in day-to-day micro conflicts, our need to win (and for the other to lose) has similar roots and can fester into intractable, even violent situations. Our best tool to avoid this is to better understand the mass of "ice" that is under the surface and at work in us and in our conflicts. As we do this, we can make the invisible visible, working with the underpinnings of conflict rather than just what is in front of us, bringing into the open new ways of moving forward that had been hidden from our view.

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