

## Triggers of Social Identity Conflicts

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## Social Identity Conflicts

- Social identity conflicts occur when conflicts from society at large spill over into the workplace
- Disagreements can begin between two people but at least one party attributes causality of the conflict to social group membership; e.g. race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, gender, or ethnicity
- Such conflicts are very difficult to resolve

## Key Question

How do triggers set off social identity conflicts?

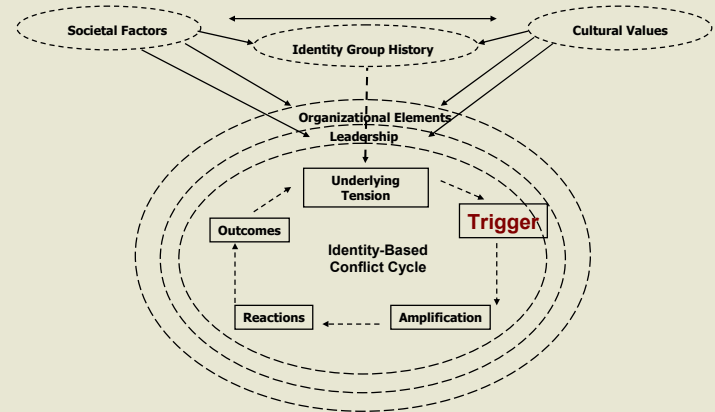
## The Forest Fire as a Metaphor



The Trigger is the spark setting off the conflict.....



**Trigger- The specific event igniting a replication of the societal conflict in the organization.**



## Social Identity Theory (SIT)

- Identity is partly defined by individual characteristics and partly defined by membership in social groups (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986)
- Salience fosters social categorization and distinctions among groups (Turner, 1985)

## The Faultline Approach

- Faultlines on social identity characteristics cause people to categorize members of their own subgroup as the in-group and others as the out-group (Lau & Murnighan, 1998)
- Faultlines can be dormant but when they are activated they can be disruptive

## Data Collection

- Interviews with 50 people yielded 35 stories of social identity conflicts in the workplace



## Data Analysis

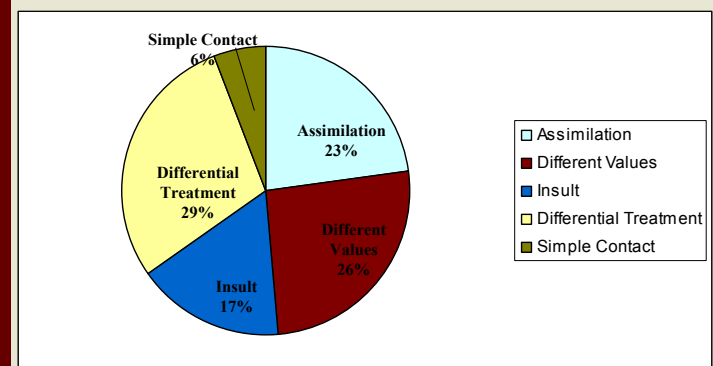
### A Qualitative Approach:

- Interviews read multiple times by multiple readers
- Stories were excerpted and then summarized
- Two coders identified themes and then developed codes using a content analytic approach
- A third coder rated the codes to establish inter-rater agreement

## Stories took place in....

- South Africa
- Mozambique
- US
- Zambia
- Israel
- Bali
- Saudi Arabia
- Germany
- Singapore
- UK
- Zimbabwe

## Five types of triggers



## Different Values



- Occurs when an organization expects an individual or group to do something that they feel violates fundamental beliefs
- Values may be religious, moral, or political

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## Different Values: Example



That's a precipitating event - then you have the born again Christians saying, "I don't recognize that construct - I don't recognize that construct of being gay." The bible doesn't say it's so. So you have this all kind of swirling around and then you have laws coming in saying that you must recognize the rights. So, you have that whole "my religion tells me to do this, but the law is telling me to do this and our company subscribes to 'x' and I don't believe it." So, that becomes a real values dilemma for people. Fundamental values dilemma. This wonder boss just has the emotional maturity to give everybody space and really honor everybody's position and containing it somehow to get work done.

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## Insult or Humiliating Action



- Occurs when an individual makes an offensive comment, insult, or slur about someone from another identity group
- Conflicts involved race, nationality, or both
- Sometimes remark grew out of attempt at humor
- Behaviors can do as much harm as words

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## Assimilation



- Occurs when the majority group expects that others will act just like them. There is an expectation that non-dominant groups will assimilate
- Examples dealt with nationality and/or religion
- Stories told by both members of dominant and non-dominant groups

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## Assimilation: An Example



I am now remembering a clash I had with students: last year, when I was teaching an art class, they put on Russian music full-volume, and it bothered me. I told them I was willing to put on music, but not anything – like I wouldn't put on heavy metal, I preferred to put on something everyone can hear, like radio. The responses of some of the students were very hostile. They understood it was because the music was in Russian, and I needed to explain to them that it wasn't, but finally I just let them play the Russian music. In addition, I tried to explain to them that it doesn't feel good when they talk in Russian in front of me and I don't understand and they know it, and that it is very impolite to exclude a person out of a conversation like that, just because he doesn't understand the language. When I talked with them, I saw how much this subject "gets to them" – but I also understand that it is sensitive and I believe them that they do suffer from racism.

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## Differential Treatment



- Occurs when one group perceives that another group has an advantage when it comes to the allocation of rewards, authorities, or punishments
- Issues of gender, tribe, religion, social class, nationality, and handicapped status

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## Differential Treatment: An Example



Now, in terms of tribes, there's a whole other story. So let's say you have a senior executive that's a member of a certain tribe; he's expected by that entire tribe to take care of the tribe. This supercedes the company. So, what are some of the results of that? Well, he'll hire as many from the tribe as possible, let's say. Or he'll try promoting some of them faster than others and if he has a certain last name, you know it doesn't take rocket science to figure this out, you know, even if you're not in his particular organization. You can actually go into our telephone book by tribe and figure out which group is headed by whom.

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## Simple Contact

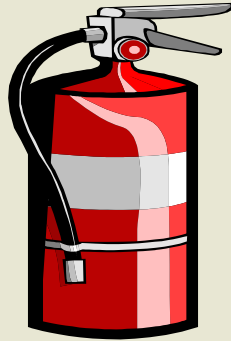


- When intergroup anxiety is unusually high, simple contact between these groups can be polarizing
- There is a pronounced history of conflict between the groups
- The mere presence of the other group triggered conflict
- Examples drawn from South Africa and Gaza Strip

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## Taking Action

- Actions taken early appear to help limit some of the disruption
- Address the issue
- Apologies seem to help
- Conflicts can be diffused



## Implications: Leadership Processes and Actions

### Individual

- Develop ability to recognize triggers
- Develop cultural self-awareness
- Develop conflict management skills
- Understand the power of perspective taking and apologies

### Organizational

- Informal norms regarding trust
- Policies and practices

## Implications: Research

- Extends the faultline model
- Emphasizes the importance of understanding the spillover of societal conflicts into the workplace—societal conflicts are an input into team processes in the workplace

## Next Steps

- Because social identity conflicts grow out of intergroup history it is essential that an understanding of how to respond takes culture, societal norms, and legal issues into account
- Research Framework was revised to better reflect context
- Working on a model of how these conflicts unfold that recognizes the differing levels of intensity
- Creation of a diagnostic tool