

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 (Chrobot-Mason, Ruderman, Weber, Ohlott & Dalton, in press)
- 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 and can disrupt work processes and practices

Key Question

- What triggers social identity conflicts?



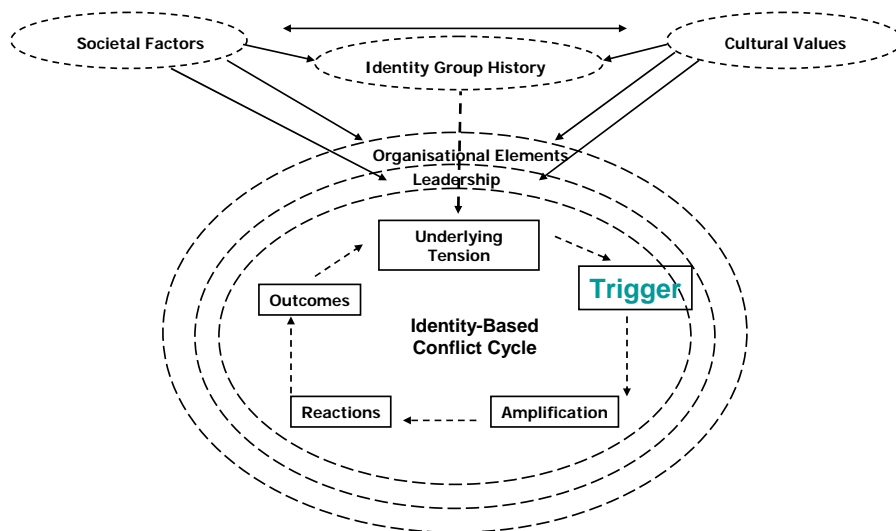
The Forest Fire as a Metaphor



The Trigger is the spark igniting the conflict.....



A specific triggering event ignites a replication of the societal conflict in the organisation.



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 categorisation and distinctions among groups (Turner, 1985)
- People who identify with a group favour their own group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986)



The Faultline Approach

- Faultlines based on social identity characteristics cause people to categorise members of their own subgroup as the in-group and others as the out-group (Lau & Murnighan, 1998; Lau & Murnighan, 2005)
- Faultlines can be dormant but when they are activated they can be disruptive



Approach: A Tale of Two Studies

- Pilot Study
 - Intended to explore the concept of triggers and develop a framework for understanding
- Full Study
 - Intended to test the generalisability of the framework for understanding triggers



Pilot Study: Data Collection

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



Stories took place in....

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

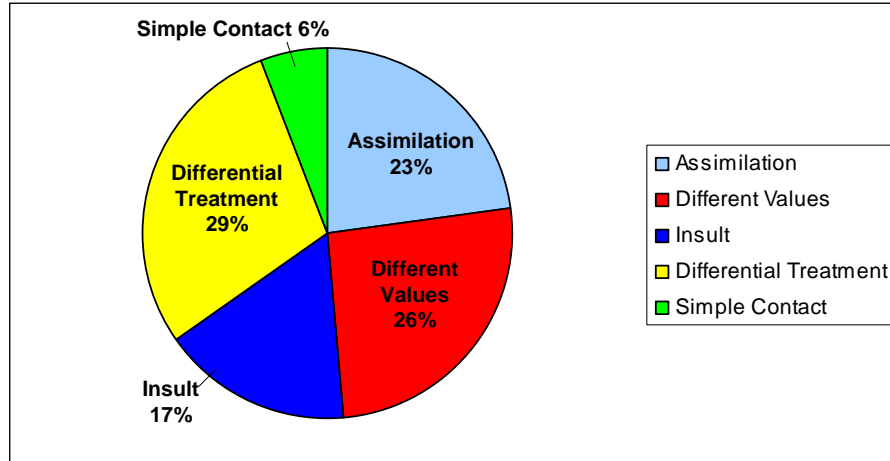


Data Analysis

- A Qualitative Approach:
 - Approach combined aspects of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with the content coding techniques of Boyatzis (1998)
 - Interviews read multiple times by multiple readers
 - Stories were excerpted and then summarised
 - Two coders identified themes and then developed codes using a content analytic approach
 - A third coder rated the codes to establish inter-rater agreement



Five types of triggers



Different Values

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



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 humour
- Behaviours can do as much harm as words



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, language, and/or religion
- Stories told by both members of dominant and non-dominant groups



Differential Treatment

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



Simple Contact

- When intergroup anxiety is unusually high due to a polarising event, simple contact between these groups can be a trigger
- There is a pronounced history of conflict between the groups
- Examples drawn from South Africa and Jerusalem



Full Study: Data Collection

- Organisations were invited to participate in the study with the expectation of receiving organisational-level feedback
- Study participants were identified by savvy insiders
- Interviews with 137 people, in 13 organisations, yielded 103 stories of social identity conflict events in the workplace
- Not every interviewee had a story about an event. Some reported multiple events. The data set included events described by 62 people.



Full Study: Location of Sites

- In Spain, US, South Africa, and Jordan stories of triggers were from one for-profit and one non-profit organisation in each country
- In Brazil, France, Germany, Hong Kong, and Singapore stories of triggers were drawn from a for-profit organisation in each country



Full Study: Triggering Events by Country and Organisation Type

Country	Brazil	France	Germany	Hong Kong	Jordan	South Africa	Singapore	Spain	US
For-Profit	2	4	1	4	4	20	6	6	4
Non-Profit					5	9		16	22

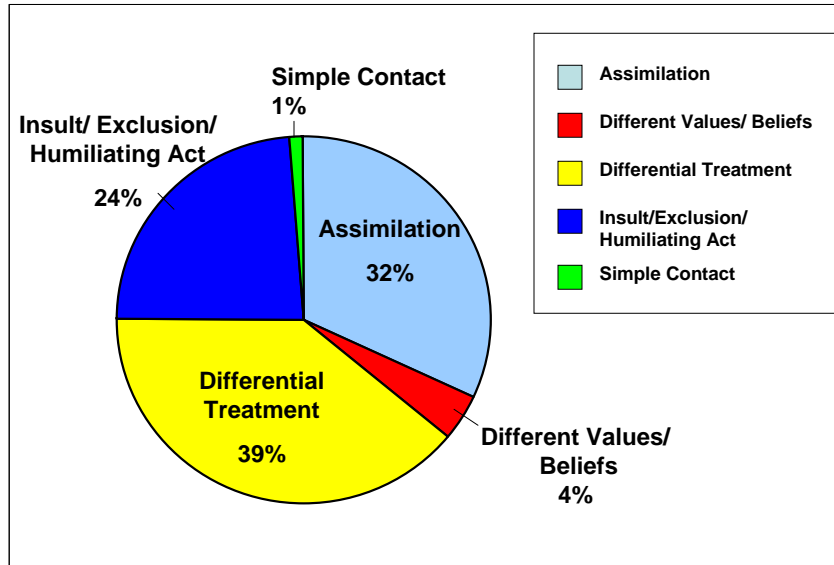


Full Study: Data Analysis

- Interviews read multiple times by multiple readers
- Stories were excerpted and then summarised
- Using the codebook from the pilot study as a reference, two coders coded the data
- Questions and suggested revisions to codes were discussed by a group of 4 coders. Decisions were made by consensus

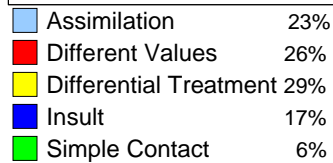
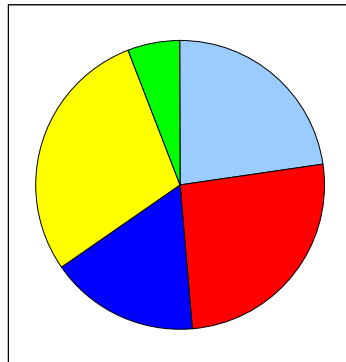


Full Study: Findings

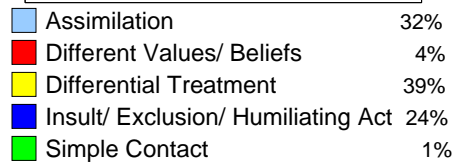
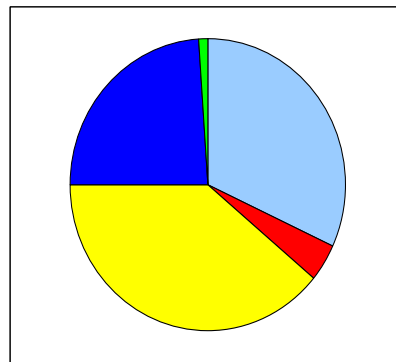


Comparison of Findings

Pilot Study



Full Study



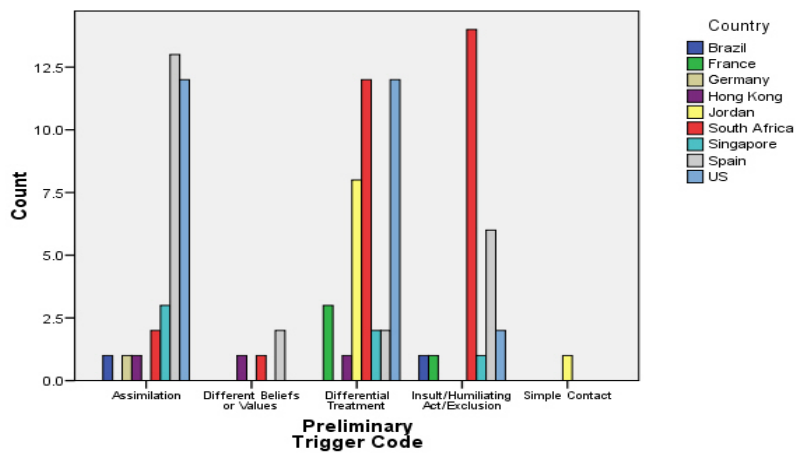
Comparison of Full Study and Pilot Data

- There was a noticeable change in the frequency of Different Values and Beliefs with there being more such events in the pilot study
- There were fewer events stemming from simple contact



Triggering Events by Country

Bar Chart



Revisions to Codes

- Lack of accommodation for pregnancy related, child care, or religious issues added to Assimilation
- Exclusion added to Insults/Humiliating Action
- Different Values expanded to include Different Beliefs
- Clarification that Simple Contact requires a polarising event in society



Discussion of Findings

- The basic framework for understanding triggers holds up in additional countries
- The most common triggers are Differential Treatment, Assimilation, and Insults
- Country context influences the type of trigger
- Different organisations have different comfort levels talking about social identity differences
- **Organisations have to manage the tension between treating different people according to the same standards or treating different people according to different standards. If leadership gets it wrong, there is a trigger.**



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 & Actions

- Individual
 - Develop ability to recognize triggers
 - Develop cultural self-awareness
 - Develop conflict management skills
 - Understand the power of perspective taking and apologies
- Organisational
 - Informal norms regarding trust and respect
 - Policies and practices
 - Monitoring and accountability
 - Balancing needs for common standards and different treatment
 - Create conditions for effective intergroup contact



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
- We revised our model to reflect the importance of spillover
- Suggests context is very important



Limitations

- Difficult to determine what is an event, the stories differed in level of detail
- Stories are influenced by the “eye of the beholder”
- Difficult to determine if an event was purely interpersonal on a dyadic level or if it involved groups of people
- We used different interviewers in different countries so it is hard to tell if country differences are due to interviewer style



Next Steps

- Check codes of full data set for inter-rater reliability
- Extend the sample to include additional sites
- Working on a model of how these conflicts unfold that recognises the differing levels of intensity
- Creation of a diagnostic tool

