

Interview

„Identity and Conflict“

Daniel Shapiro interviewed by Lars Kirchhoff

In this interview, Professor *Daniel Shapiro*, Director of the Harvard International Negotiation Program, engages in a conversation with Professor *Lars Kirchhoff*, European University Viadrina, on the role of identity in holistic approaches to conflict resolution. One focus lies on the question which role modern tribes effects play in the dynamics of contemporary conflict – and how a method-based way of dealing with the implications of identity might look like.



Professor Daniel Shapiro,
Director of the Harvard
International Negotiation
Program

Lars Kirchhoff (LK): Dan, among the audience of the journal where this interview – and a book review of „Negotiating the Nonnegotiable“ – will be published are many experienced conflict resolution and especially mediation specialists. Could you tell us in a nutshell which *genuinely new twist* your book provides that *could improve and refine their method and practice*?

Daniel Shapiro (DS): *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable* takes a new slant on an old question: How should we resolve our most emotionally charged conflicts—those that threaten our identity? Based on twenty years of research, I introduce a set of hidden emotional forces that tend to lure disputants toward impasse – even when doing so goes against their ra-

tional interests – and offer a practical method to overcome those divides.

LK: Do you see an inherent order of relevance with regard to the different levels or layers of conflict resolution work as described in the book (rationality, emotion and identity), or do you argue that all levels have to be dealt with the same attention? In other words: is identity the *core* or rather one *additional layer* neglected for too long?

DS: All three layers of human experience are present in *every* conflict. We cannot avoid thinking, feeling, and responding to the world through our own life experience. But these three lenses for understanding are not equally important to dissect in every conflict. It depends upon the nature of the conflict. If disputants are stuck in a straightforward financial tangle, a rational solution may be enough to bring closure to the situation. If they are feeling angry and resentful at one another, a mediator would be wise to help them address emotional concerns. And should the conflict directly implicate identity

– who we are and what we stand for—neither a rational solution nor emotional soothing is enough to foster sustainably harmonious coexistence. In this case, stakeholders must look beneath rationality, beneath emotionality, to better appreciate each other’s core narratives.

LK: Another method-based question: In Germany, where Gary Friedman and Jack Himmelstein trained and coined significant parts of the first generation experts, the conflict resolution field dedicates a strong focus on interests as the „heart“ of value-creating processes. One might well – and I do – argue that all 3 dimensions (rationality, emotion and identity) have their relevance when eliciting interests.

Out of your perspective, how exactly do you describe the interplay between identity and interests in processes of conflict resolution? Which extra value can the identity perspective generate when working intensely on and with interests?

DS: I suggest that conflict is like a three-tiered cake: each tier represents a way of understanding the conflict's personal significance – that is, its connection to our identity. We need to know these three tiers so we can look for them; they provide insight into the narrative moving each side to action. The bottom tier holds the deepest significance; we will fight hardest to maintain it. The top layer, *rationality*, caters to logic, intellectual understanding, and systemic analysis. It motivates us to action through *reasons*. In a conflict, we each have reasons for doing what we are doing. In the field of negotiation, these reasons are called *interests*. While people's positions may be at loggerheads, underlying interests tend to be much more compatible. The middle layer of the cake, *emotionality*, brings personal intensity to the world around us. Our emotional experience often results from unmet *core concerns*, such as for appreciation or affiliation. If a core concern is met, we feel positive emotions and are more inclined to cooperate; if it is not met, we tend to feel distressed. The deepest layer of the cake, *spirituality*, is the most pertinent to resolving an emotionally charged conflict. This dimension is not necessarily about the divine, but represents *our deeper sense of purpose*. Whereas a clash of rational perspectives leads to animated debate, a spiritual clash can lead to zealous opposition. Spirituality motivates us through a *calling*-a gut-level directive about how best to fulfill our life's purpose. Our rational mind may answer this call, and our emotional mind may urge us forward. But the calling radiates from the inner sanctums of our identity, from what the religious might term the „soul.“

LK: One of the contemporary conflicts where identity issues play a crucial role (possibly not yet sufficiently translated into the design of the domestic and international responses...) is the conflict in and around Ukraine, where a whole number of identity divisions separate the societal groups. If you look at this conflict with the identity lens, what are your thoughts, recommendations or even experiences? What can your identity approach reveal and maybe even change as compared to already existing identity approaches (Tajfel, Rothman etc.)?

DS: To understand how to overcome an emotionally charged conflict – like the one in Ukraine – we need to first understand what is keeping us emotionally in it. When our identity feels threatened, we tend to enter a divisive mindset that I call the „tribes effect“: We view the conflict as adversarial, take on a self-righteous attitude, and insulate ourselves from learning about the other's perspective – resulting in an enlarged gulf between us and them. Simply helping

disputants understand this mindset presents them with a choice: do they want to maintain that state of mind or move toward a more cooperative approach? But moving to a side-by-side relationship is still not easy, because there is a whole set of emotional forces pulling us deeper into this tribal mindset. Understanding what I call the „five lures of the tribal mind“ can be enlightening, because we come to understand the emotional forces motivating the other side to act as they do. The irrationalities even of a complex scenario like the crisis in Ukraine may not be so irrational. The five lures are vertigo, repetition compulsion, taboos, assault on the sacred, and identity politics. *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable* describes these lures in great detail and how to overcome them. Whether examining the conflict in Ukraine or another deeply entrenched conflict, helping parties to think through and understand these lures can turn a seemingly nonnegotiable conflict into one that may in fact be negotiable.

LK: In case this final question turns out to be too political, please feel absolutely free to give an evasive answer: Slogans like „America First“ have succeeded to reshape the (perceived) identity of even the most prominent actors in the highly interdependent multilateral international arena. What are the thoughts of an identity expert on these dynamics – as well as on countermeasures that might be necessary?

DS: Our world has become increasingly tribalized. While globalization has helped to interconnect people technologically, economically, socially, and politically, how should we define ourselves as global citizens? While humans crave connection, we also desire differentiation, and I fear that the concept and pragmatics of globalization have alienated a massive number of people who have withdrawn to the perceived security of *tribes* – kin-like groups to which they feel emotionally connected. Tribes are a wonderful thing; they are like family and bring us a sense of belonging. But when our tribe falls under threat – as many groups around the world feel they have- we quickly kindle the flames of the tribes effect, the divisive mindset partitioning the world into *us* and *them*. The result is the world we now live in, where tribalism runs rampant. I suggest that the antidote to tribalism is, fundamentally, a *relentless focus on the broader we*, an untiring advocacy for the importance of our interconnectedness while also appreciating our uniqueness as individuals and groups. Nelson Mandela could have left prison on an anti-white tirade but he chose a different path: the path of the *relentless we*. He helped his country and the world see that the future of South Africa was an inclusive, multi-racial democracy. In today's world, leadership at all levels would be wise to follow the wisdom of Mandela to break free of modern tribalism.

Das Interview führte Professor Lars Kirchhoff.