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Secondary school students playing the #defyhatenow game. Photo by Tebah Haggai

Identity

As children, we quickly learn to think of people as belonging to certain groups. This means that we learn who is part of our group and who is an outsider.

There are the people who are part of our family-group - and there are those who are not part of it.

There are the children we play with - and there are the children we do not play with.

There are people from our village - and there are those from other villages.

There are people who are part of our religion - and there are those of a different religion.

There are people we think are smart - and people we think are not smart.

The list goes on.

We are constantly creating these groups in our heads: us - and them. Us - and other people.

Religions, nationalities, tribes, and languages all work to create and reinforce this way of seeing the world. This way of thinking comes easily. But thinking in terms of group identity is also a source of tension and fighting between people. Why? Because it is easier to treat people badly, if we think they are very different and not like us or our group.

But there is good news. The more we reflect on identity, the more we can see that these categories are created by us. That means that we don't have to accept this way of thinking. We can instead focus on what we have in common.

The more we can see our similarities and our shared humanity, the more we can live together peacefully.

So that is the goal of this chapter: to reflect on identity, how it is formed and shaped, and how we can begin to think about it differently in order to promote peace.

▶ QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ◀

Let us think about the labels we give ourselves and others.

- How do we most often identify ourselves? Is it based on where we live? The family we belong to? Our age? Gender? Tribe? Marital status?

Religion? Political views? The work we do?

- What groups do we belong to? What groups do we not belong to?
- Did we grow up hearing people talk negatively about other groups? How were other groups talked about?
- What are the benefits of identifying with a certain group? What are the dangers of doing so?
- Think about a group you belong to that is important to you.
 - Share a story about a time when it felt good to be a member of this group.
 - Share a story about a time when it was challenging or difficult to be a member of this group.

Social Identity Wheel

The Social Identity Wheel is an activity that helps us see how identity is made up of many parts.

By thinking about identity not as one thing, but made up of many things, we can more easily find similarities with others, including those people we often think of as not belonging to our group.

Let's look at the diagram below.

The diagram has a circle that is separated into different sections, each representing one potential aspect of our identity. There are of course many only things that make our identities, but these are some of the **common elements**.



Learning to think about identity as made up of many things helps foster peace in our communities.

How? Imagine that we meet someone of a different religion. What happens? Our natural instinct is to think that we have nothing in common with that person. We exclude them from our group.

But if we think about this chart, we can notice that we share other aspects of identity.

Perhaps we are both married or the same age. By noticing what we have in common, we can use that as a way to connect with the other person. And the more we can connect, the more we break down barriers in our minds between us and them. We might even then one day be able to start exploring the areas that feel different, like religion, and realize that many of the values associated with religion are shared as well.

This furthers the connection and helps build a more peaceful co-existence with others.

The more we feel connected, the more we will be kind towards those we feel connected to. If we feel connected, we will not do harm or speak badly of them.

► QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ◀

Looking at the social identity chart, reflect on these questions:

- Which elements matter a lot to your identity?
- Which elements don't matter to you?
- Which elements do you first notice about others?
- Which elements do you rarely think about or notice?
- Which elements have the greatest effect on how you perceive others?

Here is an exercise:

Think about someone you know who is not part of your group.

Then, with this person in mind, go through the elements in the chart and try to see if there are actually some areas where you have something in common. Which ones do you share?

Here is a group exercise:

Divide participants into groups of 3-5 people and have them pick the five elements that matter most to their identity. Have them also pick their most important identity.

Then together in the larger group, call out identity categories and have everyone who strongly identifies with that category stand up.

After you have called out several categories, you can end the exercise by asking:

- How did it feel to stand when you were a part of a larger group?
- How did it feel to stand when you were alone or almost alone?
- Can you think of situations at school or in our communities when participants might feel that they have to stand up alone?
- What could you do to help someone in that situation feel that they are not alone?

(The Social Identity Wheel was adapted from the Inclusive Teaching Initiative at the University of Michigan: <http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/>)

Identity Construction

Our identity feels so normal to us that we often don't think about the fact that it is created and reinforced by the family and society we live in. Identities also change with time and circumstance.

If we are unmarried, for example, our identity is different than when we are married. When we are young we have a different identity than when we are old. Our identity before our education is different than when we are done with school.

Our identity changes everyday, in small and big ways.

► QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ◀

- How has your identity changed in the last few years? What caused this shift in identity?

Sex- and Gender-Based Identity

One of the most common ways in which we distinguish human beings is by **biological sex, based on our physical bodies and reproductive organs**. So when a baby is born and we look and call out "It's a girl!" or "It's a boy!" - this is biological sex based on the baby's body.

But when we start talking differently to the new baby, using softer tones with girls, or expecting boys to be tougher, or when telling boys it is not okay to cry, we are no longer talking about biological sex. We are talking about **gender**.

Gender is the set of behaviors, expectations, roles, and rules we have about what men and women (and boys and girls) should and should not do.

Gender is something humans create and it changes over time and between cultures. Our ideas of gender are not the same today as they were 10 years ago, or 100 years ago, or a 1000 years ago. They change.

Gender roles also differ between countries.

Ideas about gender dictate which economic, social, political, and cultural opportunities people will have. People pretend that these things are based on biological sex, but in reality it is based on the rules and norms people make up.

That is the important message here: **Gender roles have nothing to do with biological sex. But they like to hide and claim they are based on biological sex. And we are so used to thinking about them as the same thing, so we often have a hard time seeing which is biology and which is culture.**

Biological sex = based on bodies and biology
Gender = based on culture and traditions

Saying that men are often taller than women is a statement about biological sex.
But saying that men are emotionally tougher than women is about gender.

Saying that women give birth is about biological sex.
Saying that women are more gentle and nurturing is about gender.

Saying that men are more logical and should make the decisions? That's gender.
Saying that women are best suited for taking care of home and family? That's gender.
Saying that boys are more aggressive than girls? That's gender.
Saying some tasks are women's work, like cleaning? That's gender.
Saying some tasks are men's work, like being a leader or a pastor? That's gender.

Understanding gender doesn't mean we pretend there are no differences between men and women. Differences exist. Our bodies are different.

But is there anything that makes a woman physically better at cooking? No. It is just something learned and reinforced.
Is there any reason a man can't be emotional and gentle? No. These are all just learned behaviors.

The more we understand that all people are different and have different strengths, the more we can create healthy societies in which everyone is given the opportunity to thrive.

So as part of identity, let us pay attention to how often we think or say that something (an emotion, an action) is only what men do, or women do. Let us ask ourselves instead:
Is this possibly a learned behavior? Can I see it differently?

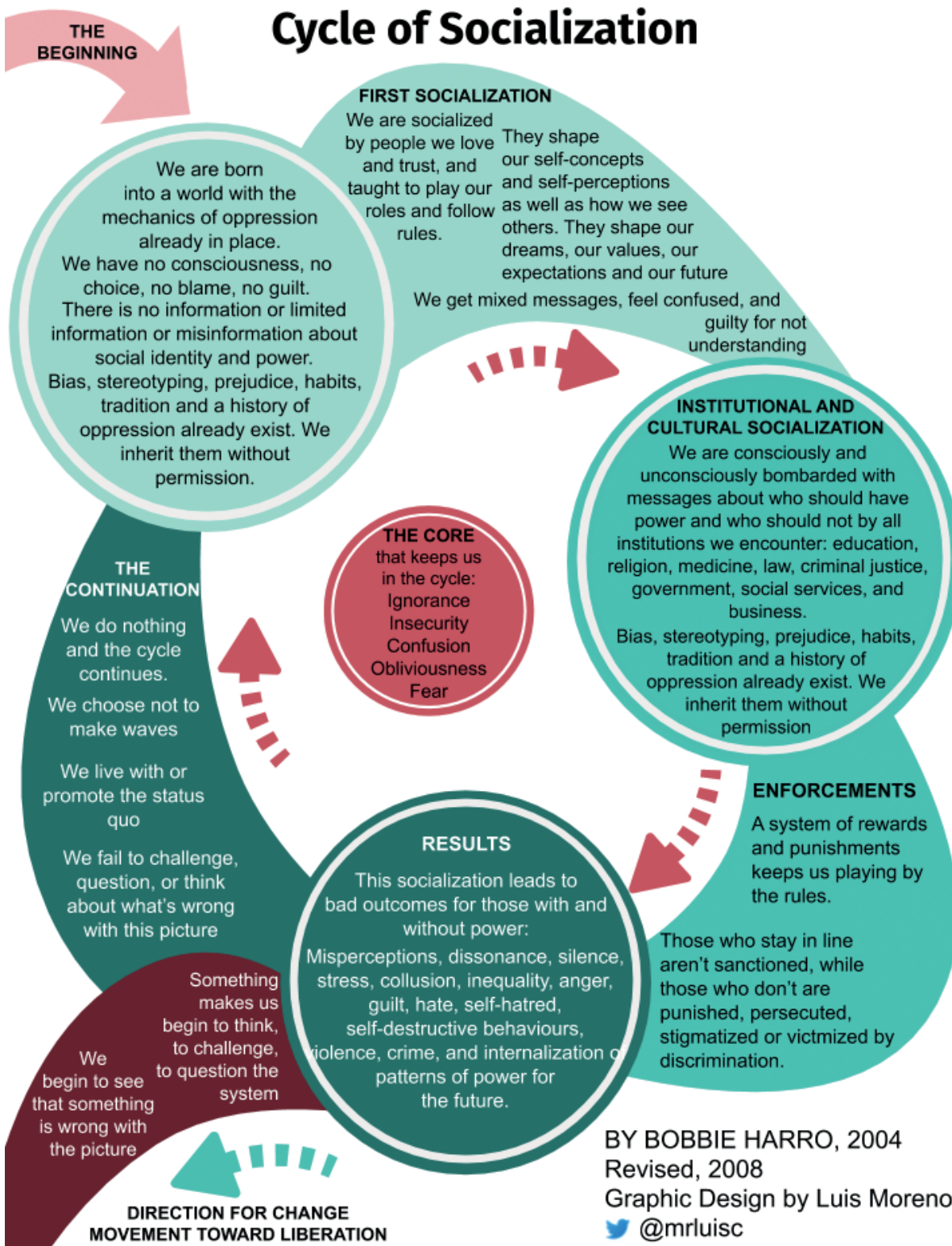
► QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ◀

- Try to explain the difference between biological sex and gender in your own words. Are there any aspects you have a hard time explaining or understanding?
- What are the messages you received about gender when you were growing up? How were women supposed to be and act like? What were men supposed to be and act like?
- How were you taught (by watching others or being told directly) that people of your gender deal with strong feelings, such as affection and anger?
- How do we often treat people who do not act "properly," according to gender roles?
- Are there tasks around the home or work that you have been told that women or men are better at? Who benefits from this? Who does not benefit?
- Is there anything you would like to do in life, but have been told you can't because of your gender?
- Societies, in which traditional gender roles have been replaced with a more open thinking about gender, tend to be very peaceful societies. Why do you think this is? What about traditional gender roles causes so much strife?

Cycle of Socialization

The Cycle of Socialization helps us understand the way in which we are socialized to play certain roles and how these roles get reinforced.

Let's look at the cycle.



The cycle begins with our birth. We have no control over this. We are also born without bias, assumptions, or questions. We are either be born into a privileged situation or born into an underprivileged situation.

Then immediately, socialization begins with our family and we are taught how to behave.

Then there are the institutions that continue to shape our views and beliefs and instill within us prejudice or acceptance.

The rules and norms of how we are expected to behave are already in place and we learn that there are rewards for conforming and consequences for rebelling.

The next circle represents the negative result we all feel by being forced to comply with this system.

And then we reach the point where we have to make a decision. We either do nothing and the cycle continues or we can choose to try to change how we behave, how we treat others, and how our institutions are run.

Doing nothing is often the easier choice, especially for those who benefit from the perpetuation of the cycle. Yet doing nothing also hurts everyone.

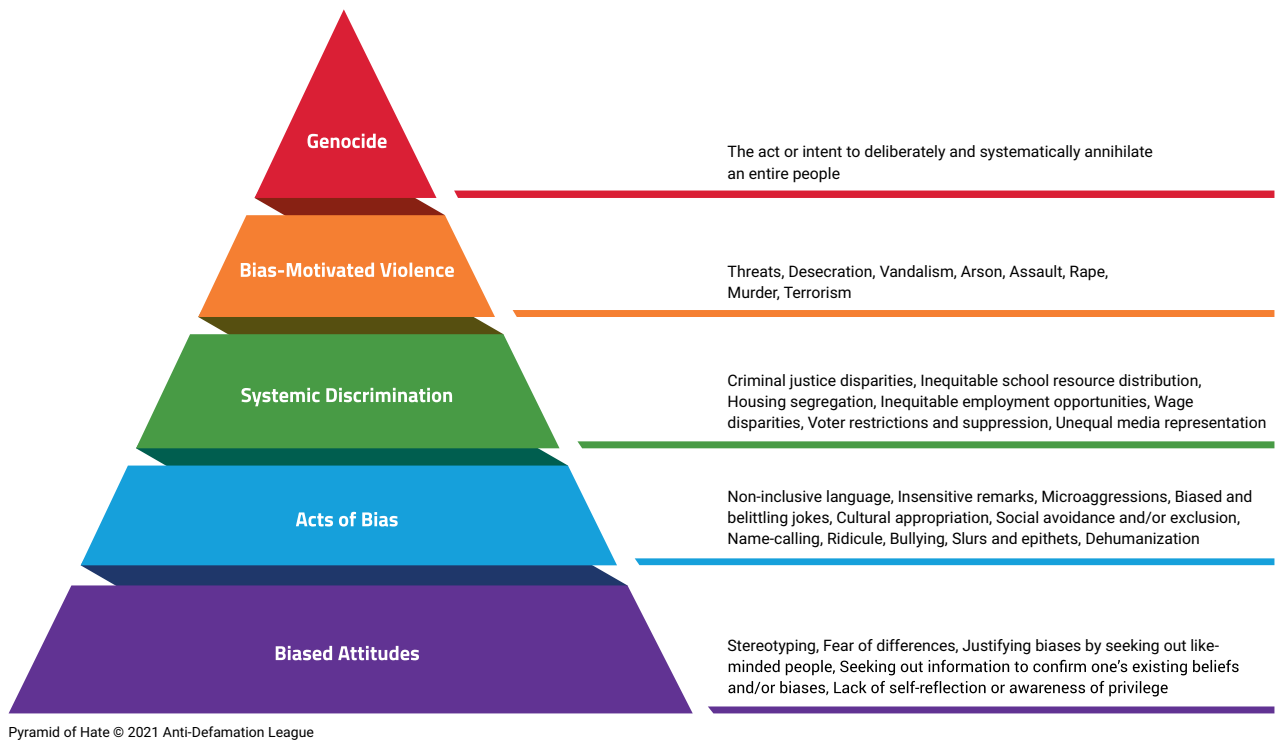
Trying to change is better, but much harder; we will face a lot of pressure to conform.

At the core are the emotions that fuel the cycle: fear, confusion, and insecurity. But the good news is that if we start acting out of courage and compassion instead, the wheel loses power.

This diagram is an attempt to show how identities are constructed and reinforced by society. It is a sad depiction of reality, but it also shows that we have the power to build more open, free communities.

► QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ◀

- What are some examples of how your family taught you how to behave “correctly” as a child? Are these positive or negative memories?
- What are examples of how schools, churches, and society tell you how to behave “correctly”?
- Does their idea of correct always feel like the right thing to you?
- What are some ways you could start breaking this cycle at home, at work, and in your interactions with other people?
 - Could you be more open to people dressing in many different styles?
 - Could you be more open to women wanting to prioritize studying and having careers?
 - Could you find a way to support girls’ studies more?
 - Could you be more open to having men take care of household duties?
 - Could you teach boys how to cook?
 - Could you let boys be more emotional, without telling them not to cry?
 - Could you let girls take the leadership roles at school and at home?
 - What other ideas come to mind?



Prejudice Awareness

Societies are often comprised of different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. Sometimes these groups feel like they do not fit together. This may be due to historical reasons, colonial legacy, or more recent events. This leads to tension, which in turn can lead to conflicts.

We are often aware of the elements of our identities that are targeted by another group in society. Our various identities can feel challenged or threatened, both in one-on-one interactions and on a larger regional and national level.

And so we are socialized to like people in our group and not like people from other groups. This behavior is called a **bias**. Bias is prejudice for or against a person or group.

Gordon Allport, a trained psychologist, showed that prejudice can be seen as a series of increasingly more serious actions. These range from simple acts of not liking someone, to avoidance, exclusion, physical violence, and genocide.

If we look at examples of genocide in the 20th century, we see how acts of bias can escalate to genocide over just a few years. Observing how bias can escalate reminds us why it is important for us to address seemingly harmless acts of bias when they occur.

When thinking about prejudice, here are some things to keep in mind:

- **Prejudice is learned and can be unlearned.**
- An effective method of addressing prejudice is to focus on individuals, instead of groups, and seek similarities.
- **People who feel good about themselves do not need to attack others. The more we can show kindness and gentleness towards ourselves, the more we can show it to others.**

The Pyramid of Hate shows how negative behaviors grow in complexity from the bottom to the top. Although the behaviors at each level negatively impact individuals and groups, as one moves up the pyramid, the behaviors have more life-threatening consequences.

Like a pyramid, the upper levels are supported by the lower levels. If people or institutions treat behaviors on the lower levels as acceptable or "normal," it results in the behaviors at the next level becoming more accepted.

The Pyramid of Hate illustrates how violence and genocide are acts that built upon the acceptance of behaviors, such as discrimination and bullying, described in the lower levels of the pyramid.

► QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ◀

It is important to say that we have all participated in the Pyramid of Hate at some level. The more honest we can be about our previous actions and the more we can reflect on this, the better we are at defying hate and instead spreading kindness and peace.

- Looking at the different levels, what actions can you admit to having done?
- What could you do to make up for them?
 - Could you vow to not do them again?
 - Could you apologize to someone you have harmed?
 - What other options can you think of to help spread peace?

The Role of Meaningful Inter-Group Dialog

Meaningful dialog between groups, especially between communities of different religions, beliefs, or cultural backgrounds, can help lower tensions or suspicions between groups.

A lack of meaningful inter-group communication and isolation from each other is often identified as a significant contributing factor to inter-group tensions. These are the situations in which hostility, discrimination, hate speech, and incitement to violence become more likely. This is especially true in situations where there is a history of inter-group tensions that have escalated in the past.

Dialog can help de-escalate tensions.

Importantly, in order to be effective, dialog must provide the space for a genuine, rather than symbolic, exchange of views. There must also be space to discuss differences and disagreements. Dialog should also be inclusive, allowing for community representation beyond traditional leaders. It is especially important to bring the voices of women, girls, youth, and displaced/minority communities to the forefront.

Informal exchanges between communities, for example in the context of sports, cultural exchanges, or when designed to address practical issues of common concern, can also prove to be important trust and relationship-building exercises.

► QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ◀

- Have you ever participated in an inter-group dialog?
- Could you imagine working to bring together different groups in order to engage in a meaningful discussion of how to support peace?
- What small step could you take to engage in inter-group dialog?
 - Could you reach out to just one other person, who is not in your group, and start on a personal level?
 - Could you start a program at a local school or church, where people could come together to meet and talk?
 - What other ideas can you think of that would help promote open dialog?
- Why is it so important to create a space where people can talk safely, respectfully, and freely?

The Role of Community Leaders

Community and religious leaders have a strong potential to influence the lives and behaviors of others. When they speak out, their messages can have a large impact. That is why leaders have an important role to play by speaking out against hate speech and violence.

Here are some ideas for everyone to follow, but especially anyone who considers themselves a leader:

- Spread messages of peace, tolerance, acceptance, and mutual respect.
- Take action to reduce tensions between communities, especially by fostering dialog and hosting events that bring people together peacefully.
- Disseminate positive messages online and offline. Spread these messages of peace in local languages, including in local dialects, when possible.
- Issue and circulate reports of religious, community, and ethnic statements and decrees by leaders and authorities denouncing incitement and/or offering alternative messages.
- Engage youth and have them try to find ways of addressing injustice in a constructive, peaceful way.
- Listen to and address the grievances of youths, even when what they say is shocking or controversial.
- Identify and train “youth ambassadors” to become dedicated actors and peer-educators in countering radicalization and violent extremism.

Mistaken Identities Podcast on BBC Radio 4

British-born, Ghanaian-American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah explores confusions of identity through an examination of four central kinds of identity: creed, country, color, and culture. He argues against a mythical, romantic view of nationhood, saying instead it should rest on a commitment to shared values.

Listen to the programs on the accompanying USB key.

CREED: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07z43ds>

COUNTRY: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07zz5mf>

COLOR: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b080t63w>

CULTURE: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b081lkkj>