

Negotiating Cultural Identities: Conflict Transformation in Labrador

Abstract for Doctoral Dissertation Research Project

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In what ways are cultural identities contested in social conflicts? How do social conflicts influence the ways in which cultural practices are defined as central to individual and collective identities? Are core cultural practices, and even identities themselves, fundamentally negotiable? These questions are at the heart of this project which examines the inter-relatedness of social conflict, cultural identity, and negotiation processes in Eastern Canada, paying particular attention to the experience of the Innu, Inuit, Métis and Settlers of Labrador.

Historically, encroachment by settlers and Euro-Canadian institutions in the region has assumed different forms and resulted in conflict over a wide range of issues. Contested issues presently involve land claims, environmental use and protection, economic development, and collective self-determination. In part, these disputes entail concerns over identity, cultural integrity and sovereignty for aboriginal groups in Labrador and across Canada in relation to constitutional, legal, and political frameworks involving federal, provincial and aboriginal governments.

Conventional conflict resolution theorists and practitioners have treated culture in the context of social conflict as merely another variable, albeit a significant one, capable of affecting substantive outcomes. This approach holds that substantive issues such as those widely regarded as being integral to individual or collective cultural identities are prone to escalation, resistant to resolution or altogether non-negotiable. This study advances an alternative view which focuses on the processes by which culture is *shaped by* conflict rather than merely being a cause of or complicating factor in it. The findings of this project indicate that cultures and identities have a transactional character which points to the fundamental negotiability of cultural signifiers (symbols, practices, narratives) and identity markers.

As culture and ethnicity become increasingly salient for identity politics and emerging global conflicts, a better understanding of these dimensions of human interaction will be required for developing and promoting creative, non-violent peace initiatives at national, regional and international levels. Results of the proposed study will contribute to an enhanced interdisciplinary understanding of how cultural components are negotiable and provide insight into how peacebuilding approaches may reduce the felt need for destructive conflict escalation and foster the constructive transformation of identity-based social conflicts through improved communication, dialogue and informed policy development.

Preliminary research for the project was conducted in Labrador in August, 1995. Qualitative field research was conducted from 1997-1999 in conjunction with a two-year voluntary service assignment performing regional peacebuilding activities for Mennonite Central Committee, the relief, service and peace agency (NGO) of the North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. As a form of social action research, this study utilized my training and experience in mediation, dialogue facilitation and other forms of conflict transformation as part of an on-site, experiential research project. This approach recognizes the importance of closely linking social research and action, intentionally connecting both methodology and practice with theory building. For the researcher, applied peacemaking is done for its own sake and is conducted for what it is, basic praxis of the discipline with respect to both social science and conflict resolution.