

Integration yes... but **not** in my backyard

A neurobiological look at human nature

By Patrick Schmidt

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Let me begin by having us look at the main title of this talk. It evokes a paradox in human nature — we say one thing, but afterwards we often do the opposite. It's as if we have conflicting forces in our persona. And this paradox has intrigued me as an interculturalist; I can fully identify with the first part of the title, but at the same time, I can understand why many people, including myself can also sympathize with the opposing idea.

Conflicting Forces



Two souls live in me, alas!
Wolfgang Goethe



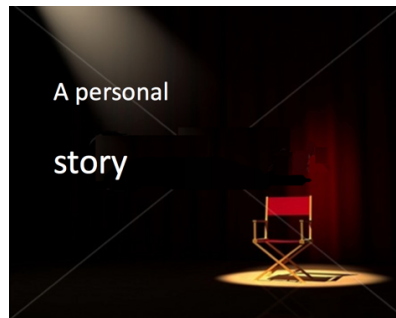
I can resist everything, except temptation.
Oscar Wilde

Philosophers and playwrights have written often about the conflicting forces we all seem to have. Goethe in his tragic play *Faust* spoke of the two souls in his breast — one that tried to attain the majestic heights of idealism and the other that pulled a person down to the sensual desires of the body. In the same fashion, Oscar Wilde coined the famous oxymoron: “I can resist everything, except temptation”.

Now, I'm not a philosopher or playwright, but for this talk, I would like to I examine how opposing forces play out in our minds, especially in the field of intercultural relations, offering an explanation why we have them from a neuro-biological point of view and how we can deal with them in a positive manner. I want to point out that I'm not neurobiologist, but I have read many articles in this field. Some of the ideas presented may appear to some of you provocative and controversial. But it is my hope that they will stimulate critical thinking and honest discussion about human nature.

Let me begin with a personal story.

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A little over two years ago, I was having lunch with a professor responsible for the intercultural communications program at a large European university. While we were eating, he mentioned he'd taken his daughter out of the public school system and put her into a private school. I asked why and he answered: "The massive influx of migrant children had caused many social and ethnic conflicts, so much so that the scholastic level was beginning to fall." He was quite aware that his decision went against all of his ideals, but his fear that his child's intellectual development could be endangered overtook him.

Although I could understand his point of view, I couldn't help but think of the contradictions in his behavior. Here was a highly educated man, a strong believer in diversity and inclusion. He was, you could say, one of the "best and brightest" of his generation. Yet, by taking his daughter out of the public school system, he was doing the opposite of what he was teaching in his classes.

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Dilemma



Preserving our cultural identity while demonstrating
solidarity and empathy for the "others".

His action illustrates the dilemma many of us face today: how do we reconcile the desire to preserve our cultural identity and material well-being while, at the same time, demonstrate human solidarity and empathy for the impoverished “others”?

The same dilemma is also having an impact on the social policies in many countries. One such country is Sweden.

Back in the '80s, Sweden adopted a generous, open door policy toward asylum-seekers. The country was trying to do its part to help alleviate some of the world's problems while maintaining its cultural identity. Then, in 2016, the central-left coalition government made a dramatic U-turn and closed its borders to all migrants.

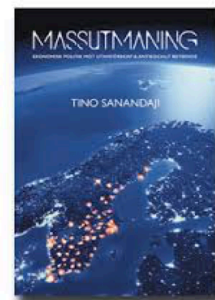
A year later, Swedish economist Tino Sanandjaji published *Mass Challenge*, which offered an empirical explanation for his government's abrupt change in policy. Drawing on facts and statistics from various government agencies, the book became a Swedish best-seller.

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Mass Challenge

by Dr. Tino Sanandjaji

- Integration *function of group-size*
- Critical mass *a chain reaction, generating its own dynamic*



His premise is simple: adaptation and integration is a function of group-size. When the number of migrants is small, the host country surrounds and encourages new arrivals to learn the language, interact with neighbors, and work with people. A gradual process of adapting to and absorbing new values takes place.

If, however, the migrant group becomes very large, you're dealing with *critical mass* — a term from the field of nuclear physics. It's defined as a chain reaction that generates its own dynamic. Dr. Sanandjaji took the law of critical mass and applied it to social groups. Migrants who feel overwhelmed by the new culture can decide to take the easier path. Instead of adapting to the new culture, they work and interact mostly within their community. There is less interaction with the host country and a parallel culture emerges.

In his research, Sanandjaji found that in 1990, non-European immigrants accounted for only 3% of the Swedish population. With such a small number, adaptation and integration was quite doable; problems could be isolated and managed within the bigger framework of society. But over time, this had become more difficult. Today in Sweden, the non-European population has increased to nearly 18% and is growing by one to two percent a year.

The growth rate, according to Sanadajji, was not the real problem. Rather, it was the *persistent* and *dangerous* gaps in education, employment and income. Policy experts, who have looked at this, are unanimous in their conclusion: this is a social time bomb.

This is not to say all migrants are disadvantaged. A sizeable number of Iranians, Iraqis and Ethiopians are well integrated, dress like everyone else, speak fluent Swedish and talk to anyone. But the majority of migrants live primarily in enclaves, are frequently unemployed, do not speak Swedish well, feel socially excluded and don't want to participate in Swedish society. And that group has increased to a point that it has become a critical mass, generating its own dynamic and is now influencing everything around it — schools, social spaces, poverty levels and crime rate. And when this happens, cultural tensions increase and long-time residents, who can afford it, start to leave the neighborhood, the so-called “white flight” phenomenon.

The interesting question for me was: what are exactly the psychological and neurological factors that can explain “white flight” and the subsequent social exclusion of migrant group? What goes on in people's minds and their later behavior when the make-up of their neighborhood changes?

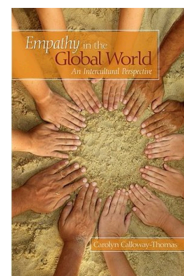
Many experts on migration policies have looked into this. Professor Dr. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas, in her book *Empathy in the Global World*, offers an explanation.

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[Empathy in a Global World](#)

by [Professor Dr. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas](#)

- Population explosion in 3rd world countries
- Massive [migration](#)
- Numerical balance threatened



High birth rates and demographic changes in third-world countries, coupled with wars, global warming and economic crises, have generated massive migration throughout the world. The reaction among people in the host countries has not been so much that of empathy, rather more of unease, inaction or even overt rejection. She argues that when the numerical balance appears to pose a threat to the integrity of the in-group majority and as well as the out-group minority, empathy takes a back seat to cultural identity.

What Calloway-Thomas is saying is that people in general don't have negative feelings toward foreigners as individuals. But when an out-group grows dramatically, the in-group majority fears losing its cultural identity. The *NY Times* recently described this in-group as a "majority with a minority complex". To counteract this, many in the majority become overly nationalistic or xenophobic. Or, as we say in our field, ethnocentric.

We see this phenomenon clearly in highly collective societies, such as Korea or Japan. Historical and geographical forces have forged these two Asian nations to become highly unified in their need to survive. Their strong sense of tribal unity and in-group favoritism make them suspicious and wary of foreigners to the point that they openly tell migrants: "We are who we are and you are who you are. You are not part of our culture."

This is less prevalent in societies founded by migrants, such as the USA, Australia. Americans tend to be more accepting of migrants, as the country has historically been transforming itself continuously with new arrivals. Nonetheless, when the number of outsiders increases too rapidly, the in-group majority will tend to seek preserving its national/cultural identity.

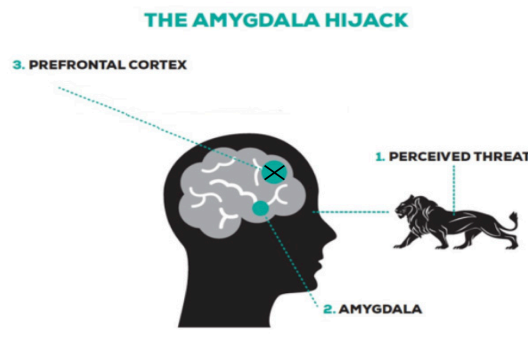
The field of neurobiology offers an interesting explanation on why people react in these ethnocentric ways. According to neuro-scientists, there is a small organ in the middle part of the brain that governs our feeling of fear and anxiety. It's called the amygdala. Its main task is to quickly scan and evaluate danger and then decide if we run or stay put. This is the "survival instinct"- fight, flight, freeze and can be considered the primitive part of the mind.

But there is another part of the brain that seeks to regulate and moderate this survival instinct: it's at the front part of our head, called the pre-frontal cortex. This area is linked to analytical thinking, language, mindfulness, empathy, and decision-making, the rational part of the mind. When the amygdala and pre-frontal cortex are well integrated, the brain is said to be balanced.

To illustrate this, think of your brain as my closed left fist. The thumb here is at the middle part of brain, the limbic area, where the amygdala is found. And the tip of my fingers here is the prefrontal cortex. Now, imagine you are all in a movie theater, watching a film on safari hunting. Suddenly, a lion appears on the screen and is running towards you. Our thalamus, which receives this incoming stimulus, will send the threatening signal to both the amygdala and the pre-frontal cortex. The amygdala will sense danger, but the fingers downward say, “it’s OK, it’s only a movie, we’ve been here before, we can deal with it”. The pre-frontal cortex is calming the amygdala. There’s an upward flow and a downward feedback, an exchange of information.

But now, let’s say, a real lion appears in the theater. You will sense a real danger. The amygdala has to make a split-second decision on whether to fight or flee. To do this, it will knock the pre-frontal cortex out of action, something known as the “amygdala hijack”. This term was coined by the psychologist Daniel Goleman in his book *“Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than I.Q.”*

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It’s at this moment, your ability to analyze a situation is no more functioning. Your mind ignores complexity and resorts to simplistic, either/or responses. In this case, you’ll run out of the theatre without thinking. The same thing happens when we are extremely angry — we react emotionally, without reflecting. After you recover to your original level of functioning, which may take hours, you will often think and say, “Oh, I shouldn’t have said or done that”.

Now imagine a whole community that feels that their way of life, their existence is being threatened. The mechanism of the survival instinct will start to kick in. Many people will join the bandwagon of fear, become radical and look for simple answers to complex problems. Unscrupulous politicians will take advantage of these groups. Donald Trump’s success in the

USA could be understood from this perspective. He overstates the danger of Central American immigration to a group of people who are economically vulnerable and fearful. By doing so, he sets collectively the survival instinct, i.e. amygdala hijack, into motion and afterwards, his simple solutions sound “great” to his audience. In France, the Yellow Jackets movement, and ethnic minority groups, such as the 2nd or 3rd generation of French-Arabs or French-Africans, are far more susceptible to radical ideas that tell them that there’s a conspiracy among the French white elite to stop them from developing.

The ongoing battle between the survival instinct and the pre-frontal cortex, the primitive versus the rational, I believe, clarifies in part why we have contradicting and conflicting forces in ourselves. And the amygdala hijack explains in large part why many people follow demagogues and extremists and the rise of polarized societies. The question now is: Is there a way to transcend our fear and natural ethnocentric tendencies and increase intercultural cooperation?

There’s no clear answer to this. Ideally, the way to facilitate cooperation across cultural boundaries is through dialogue, that is co-creating or co-constructing new forms of meaning in the mind.

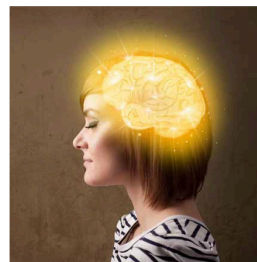
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Dealing with ethnocentrism

Psychotherapy

Intercultural training

Meditation



This approach is the basis of all psychotherapy and intercultural training. Implicit in these approaches is that all persons and groups need insight and enhanced consciousness to unlock the possible benefits of intercultural cooperation.

Then, there’s meditation. The latest studies in mindfulness strongly suggest that daily meditation activates the prefrontal cortex, which in turn increases consciousness, empathy and cognitive thinking, and at the same time reducing the strength of the amygdala. There’s an excellent video on this topic — “*Mindfulness and Neural Integration: The new science of the mind*”, a talk given by Dr Daniel Siegel, a psychiatrist and neurobiological researcher.

The approaches I've just offered are more for the individual. But is this realistic for a whole society? We all know that education and training carry high costs. And as anthropologist Edward Hall and zoologist Konrad Lorenz have repeatedly pointed out, overcoming cultural imprinting is a difficult process because it is largely unconscious and deeply embedded in our minds. What they are saying is that we can never fully get rid of our cultural conditioning. We are somehow programmed to be tribal, to strongly identify with the group responsible for our early socialization. Those of you who do intercultural interventions are well aware of this. All we can hope for in our trainings is some sort of increased consciousness of our ethnocentric tendencies, which hopefully will pave the way for better dialogue and co-creation with our foreign counterparts.

But, there seems to be some new and promising approaches for integrating out-groups into society. Research in evolutionary biology points to extraordinary changes people can achieve by participating in intentional and targeted small-group interactions. These bottom-up activities can address the issue of belonging, which in turn leads to a more positive self-esteem. And research indicates that small-group interactions are more effective in reducing the ethnic divide.

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Inclusion of out-groups



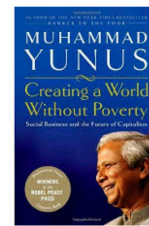
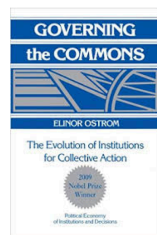
Pandillas in Milan

Decentralized units *produce* positive, sustainable changes

Take, for example, the city of Milan and how it transformed Latin-American street gangs, known as *pandillas*, into community groups that promoted their integration into Italian society. By having the gangs organize small Latin-American musical festivals, they generated a positive sense of belonging. This, in turn, led to more constructive social behavior with their Italian counterparts. What is the message? Small but meaningful experiences can generate some powerful outcomes.

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A Functional Blueprint for Change



This idea is supported by the work of Nobel Prize winners Elinor Ostrom and Muhammad Yunus, which shows that small, decentralized units, such as micro banks for the poor in India, are far more efficient in producing positive, sustainable change in people and groups than laissez-faire or top-down government strategies.

We can also learn from countries that have initiated positive social change on a large scale. Take Canada. The country appears to have developed a relatively successful migration policy: it ignores race, religion and ethnicity of migrants and instead looks at age, education, job skills and language ability. Essentially, the Canadian government is looking for people who have already programmed themselves mentally to overcome barriers, thus increasing their probability of adapting and contributing to a new culture. It's a win-win proposition for the dominant and migrant groups. As evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel in his book, *Wired for Culture* states, "Prosperity triumphs over tribalism".

The Swedish, Italian and Canadian examples that you've just heard about could be the beginning of an honest discussion on how rapid cultural change can be dealt with. Instead of becoming stuck in politically correct discourse and self-satisfying "happy talk", we can become more pro-active in our thinking. What I mean by this is we need to have the courage to talk openly about the real problems of large-scale migration, about how we've sometimes been naive about diversity, and to take a hard look at the science of brain, mind and bias. If we can do this, then we open ourselves to the learning processes necessary for real social transformation.

This, in my estimation, is where we, as interculturalists, can make a contribution and have a significant impact on society. And it's with these closing words, I thank you for your attention.