The inaugural Change Makers dialogue explored how social identity in the context of groups can help to tackle some of the developed world’s toughest social challenges. Three CIFAR fellows – Alexander Haslam and Catherine Haslam, both of the University of Queensland, and Robert Oxoby from the University of Calgary – discussed their ideas in Edmonton, Alberta, on Feb. 5, 2014. They were joined by local community champions Martin Garber-Conrad, chief executive officer of the Edmonton Community Foundation; Allan Undheim, the vice-president for Community Building and Investment at the United Way of Alberta Capital Region; and Franco Savoia, the co-chair of the Alberta Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness and director of Vibrant Communities Calgary.

Social identity recognizes that humans are social animals and that group memberships play an important role in creating a sense of self and a sense of identity. This social identity allows us to internalize the group – its members are no longer seen as strangers, but as part of ourselves. The social identity created by memberships gives people a sense of purpose and helps maintain good health. It is also the foundation for group behaviour, allowing trust, communication, influence, social connection and solidarity. People with multiple group memberships are more resilient in the face of life changes, and show better mental and physical health.

Social Idenity Matters for Our Communities

Social identity is at the heart of successful clinical interventions. Data from the English Longitudinal Study of Aging looking at men over 50 showed that group membership was a predictor of depression relapse two years later. Men who did not join any new groups had a 40 per cent chance of a relapse, while men who joined three or more new groups cut the possibility of relapse to 15 per cent. However, not all groups are the same. A study done in Brisbane connected vulnerable people with new groups. It found that people need to identify with the group for it to have an impact on social identity. If they did, there was almost a 30 per cent improvement in mental health. People who identify more with their workplace experience lower stress.

A meta-analysis of 15 studies of social identity and depression showed that there is a robust relationship between the two. Another meta-analysis of 50 studies exploring the relationship between social identity and workplace stress concluded that there is a strong relationship between strong identification with one’s work team and a low stress level. The same is true for the relationship between a strong organizational identification and a low level of workplace stress.

Joining groups reduces chances of depression. But not all groups are created equal.

CIFAR Senior Fellow Alexander Haslam, Research Laureate at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, explained that an individual’s social identity and therefore mental health can come under threat when there are adverse events or transitions, such as aging, unemployment or discrimination. The resulting loss of social identity is the basis for the sense of disconnection, isolation and displacement in the world.

“Meaningful conversation can change our world.”

- Franco Savoia, Co-chair, Alberta Inter-agency Council on Homelessness & Director of Vibrant Communities Calgary

Alexander Haslam – Social Groups Beat Depression and Stress
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Catherine Haslam – Identity-Driven Interventions Protect Health and Well-Being

Catherine Haslam, CIFAR Associate Fellow, University of Queensland, Australia, reviewed identity-driven interventions that protect individual health and well-being. Two key assumptions underpin her research:

- Group interventions driven by social identity need to create group relationships that have value, purpose and meaning to the participants.
- Group membership alone is not a solution. Groups must be based on co-operation, trust and mutual support to have an effect. It is vital to avoid groups that are exploitative and use humiliation as a tool.

**“Why does elder care focus on the individual and why do we leave social interventions to volunteers or families? We have the evidence. How do we get the will?”**

- Martin Garber-Conra, CEO, Edmonton

Robert Oxoby - Social Identity Leads to Participation in Social Programs

CIFAR Senior Fellow Robert Oxoby, University of Calgary, discussed how social identity affects the way people think about available resources and how they access them. Drawing on a 1990s European Union study which examined how immigrants face social exclusion, three dynamics were identified:

- **Relativity:** Inclusion or exclusion is relative to society, place and institution;
- **Agency:** Inclusion or exclusion comes through acts of others;
- **Dynamism:** Inclusion or exclusion is not based only on current state, but on perceptions of the future.

Policies aimed at increasing inclusion focus on providing employment, health, housing, social protection and education for the poor, immigrants and the homeless. However, the emphasis has often been on removing employment barriers such as discrimination. What has been neglected is the access to services, which is related to social identity.

He drew on two studies conducted with an autism

**“As well meaning as the social sector is, it excludes people based on issues around transportation, childcare, language barriers, and racism.”**

- Allan Undheim, VP Community and Investment, United Way of Alberta Capital Region
organization in Calgary and Edmonton to further demonstrate that social identity impacts access to programs and services.

In one study, if the parent of a child with autism identifies with the organization, they have a greater awareness of the available financial and social resources. This leads to lower levels of family stress. When a parent who was not in the organization was paired with a parent who was a member, the non-member was much more aware of the available resources and able to access them one year later.

Another study took families in poverty and matched them with a savings and financial literacy program. The successful participants were more likely to exhibit self-control and became part of a group that planned for the future. Teaching them about their finances helped change their social identities.

Lessons for Stronger Community through Identity

- The power of social identity is unlocked by working with people, not against them.
- Neglecting social identity leads to poor outcomes. For example, 80% of restructurings fail because administrators pay no attention to social identity.
- Group activity alone is not a recipe for success. Groups need to have meaning and value to each person, and the type of groups that fulfill those needs changes throughout an individual’s life.
- Policies must take social identity into account, because people won’t take advantage of programs unless it meets their identity.

INNOVATION IN ACTION

GROUPS FOR HEALTH

Catherine Haslam (University of Queensland, CIFAR Associate Fellow) and Alex Haslam (University of Queensland, CIFAR Senior Fellow) created a social identity intervention targeting social isolation that is called Groups for Health or G4H. The intervention reduced anxiety, stress, depression and loneliness across the board and also helped people to develop new connections. These gains predicted their health and well-being outcomes. It uses five modules to teach people how to engineer their own social environments:

1. **Schooling:** Teaching the value of groups for health;
2. **Scoping:** Increasing awareness of each person’s social relationships and the existing gaps using a mapping tool;
3. **Sourcing:** Showing them the skills that help them to maintain and use their groups most effectively;
4. **Scaffolding:** Helping them to use this group as a platform to make new connections;
5. **Sustaining:** Allowing participants to try out their new skills and see if they can develop new connections.

Looking for more?

Videos from each session are available at changemakers.cifar.ca/videos/, and links to relevant research relevant can be found at http://www.cifar.ca/change-makers/

Are you a Change Maker working to harness happiness to improve your community?
Send us an email and introduce yourself - ideaseexchange@cifar.ca

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