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Alexander Frame

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Intersectional identities in interpersonal communication

Alex Frame

University of Burgundy, Dijon, France

Abstract

Dominant theories of identity in the social sciences appear ill-equipped to take into account the fact that individuals may simultaneously refer to multiple identities in seeking to relate to/make sense of one another during interpersonal interactions. This chapter reviews the ways in which (i) Social Identity Theory, (ii) Identity Theory and (iii) Intersectionality can be applied to analysing such situations, the aspects foregrounded by each respective theoretical framework, and the perceived limits of each. It then argues the case for situating analyses on the level of “identity traits” (behaviours attributable to a particular identity or identities), rather than of identities, in order to bypass a certain number of conceptual limitations and cast light upon the ways in which individuals may seek to privilege not only accountability (Garfinkel 1967) but also coherency between intersecting identities during an interpersonal encounter.

Introduction

Over recent years, the concept of intersectionality has had a major impact on the study of identities in the social sciences (L. McCall 2005; Hancock 2007; Davis 2008; Choo and Ferree 2010), stemming out from the fields of feminist, queer, or postcolonial studies into mainstream sociology, management and communication studies. Inspired by the study of discrimination against minority individuals and groups, the intersectional approach to human interactions states that many individuals belong not just to one minority or underprivileged group, but to several (for example a Black woman who suffers discrimination on the grounds of both gender and skin colour), and as such their experience as a group is different to that of (typical) Black men or White women. As intersectionality scholar Kimberle Crenshaw originally pointed out: “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw 1991, 140). This concept thus encourages us to view individuals not just as members of a particular category, but as complex individuals both unique and belonging to several categories (*infra*). However, the success of the concept has also exposed it to criticism, since it has been suggested by some scholars that intersectionality constitutes too loose a theoretical framework, harbouring a variety of approaches to categorisation and lacking clear methodology, making it very difficult to apply in practice (Walby, Armstrong, and Strid 2012).

In a parallel evolution not directly linked to intersectional analyses, contemporary developments in the field of intercultural communication have also led scholars to increasingly denounce over-simplistic, essentialising views which point only to national culture (and identity) as the variable influencing behaviour in intercultural interactions (Costa-Lascoux, Hily, and Vermès 2000; Abdallah-Pretceille 2006; Dervin 2011; Frame 2012; Poutiainen 2014). There have been calls for approaches which take into account multiple identities and multiple cultures in studies of interpersonal communication between foreigners (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009; Frame 2014a). The same line of reasoning can also be applied to interpersonal communication in general. Although the social sciences today tend to paint the picture of a complex and reflexive individual who plays out various identities in his/her day-to-day encounters (Giddens 1991; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; S. Lash and Featherstone 2002), even in the field of interpersonal communication, the majority of studies which specifically address the question of identity seem unable or unwilling to take into account more than one identity *at a time*.

By discussing the ways in which we use / play on different identities in interpersonal communication to make sense for and of one another in our everyday interactions, this chapter aims to suggest ways to avoid some of the limitations outlined above. It will explore the extent to which intersectionality and other theoretical frameworks mobilising the concept of identity can be used to better understand, from a social constructionist perspective, the complex interpersonal processes involved in face-to-face interactions between (multi-faceted) individuals.

Identities in communication: Theoretical frameworks

The term “identity” is often recognised as only having been popularised as a scientific concept, in the field of psychology, by the work of Erik Erikson in mid-20th century. However, the term was preceded by discussions of the neighbouring concept of “self” (James 1890; Mead 1934), stemming from philosophical discussions of the different “facets” which an individual can be seen to present in different social situations¹, and in which symbolic interactionist approaches to identity (*infra*) can be seen to originate. Following on from Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) and Max Weber (1905), many scholars in the twentieth century associated the concept of identity with a progressive shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*: from a stable self, based on deep-rooted, community based relationships linked to status and birth, to more flexible, changeable, negotiable society-based social ties. Social theory in late 20th century, for example in the debate around “reflexive modernity”, as reflected in Anthony Giddens’ concept of “reflexive self” (Giddens 1994), Ulrich Beck’s “risk society” (Beck 1992), sees individuals as becoming increasingly self-reflexive, able and even obliged to negotiate their various identities: “individuals must innovate rules in a bricolage of their own identities”, suggests Scott Lash (1999, 3). In the context of this progressive shift to considering “identity” as an essential part of life in society and of social interactions in particular, several theoretical frameworks have been used to conceptualise the term.

Social Identity Theory

One of most popular and well-known theories is Social Identity Theory (SIT), elaborated by Henri Tajfel and his colleagues of the “Bristol School” of social psychology (Tajfel 1982; Turner et al. 1987; Abrams and Hogg 1990; Hogg and Ridgeway 2003). This theory of intergroup relations and its central “social identification” hypothesis, based on considerations of differing relationships with and perceptions of ingroup and outgroup members, are sufficiently well-known not to merit extensive review here. It is sufficient for the purposes of the present chapter to note that when thinking about identities in interactions, this theory leads us to distinguish two types of identity: social (group) identities and personal (individual) ones.

When a social identity is foregrounded in an interaction, according to the theory, the individual is considered as a typical representative of the corresponding social group, and is thus attributed character traits, beliefs, ways of behaving, etc. associated with that group. Conversely, when the personal identity is foregrounded, the individual is differentiated from the group, and the focus falls on what makes him/her specific, idiosyncratic as opposed to other group members. It follows, then, that personal identity is not, for SIT, the identity of the person in his/her complexity, but their specificity as opposed to the group. For social identity theorists, in any given interaction, (dynamic) representations of an individual move along a continuum between social and personal identities, depending on a variety of factors, including the social context, intergroup rivalry, what is being said and done, and so on.

¹ The focus of this paper is on sociological and psychological approaches to identity, and how they might inform studies of interpersonal communication. It thus does not focus here on the long-standing philosophical discussion around the notion of personal identity, which considerably pre-dates the work evoked here.

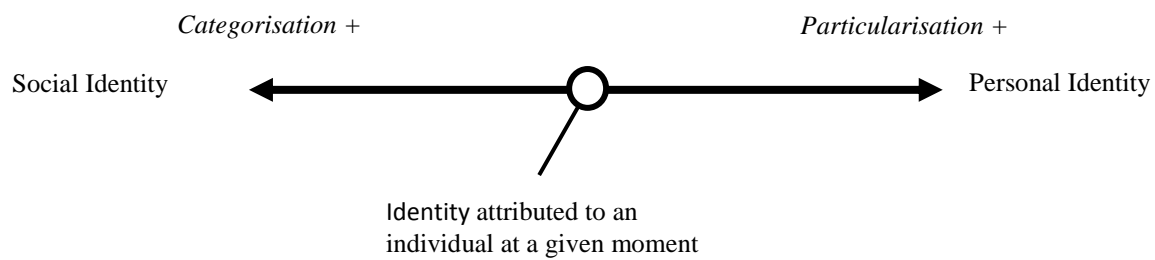


Figure 1: *The identity continuum as implied by Social Identity Theory*

However, SIT thus arguably adopts a dominantly unidimensional view of personal identity, and has difficulty explaining the different facets of an individual's self, the different groups to which they belong and the different roles they may play from one situation to another, or simultaneously. In its original formulation, the theory thus appears slightly limited for thinking about multiple identities and how they may manifest themselves in interactions.

Extending SIT

In order to take into account multiple social identities, SIT might conceptualise representations of the individual's multi-faceted self not as a single two-dimensional continuum, but as a three-dimensional space. This imaginary space would be structured by the various social identities which could be attributed to that particular individual. If we imagine that a particular individual may have several identities which share some similar traits, for example in the case of an individual with the following professional/semi-professional identities: policeman, ex-soldier and army reservist, these identities might be represented as being situated closer together or forming clusters within the imaginary three-dimensional space, while being distanced from other social identities which can be attributed to the same individual, but which don't share as many or the same common traits, for instance such as a particular regional or local identity, an identity of opera-lover, etc.. This is represented in figure 2.

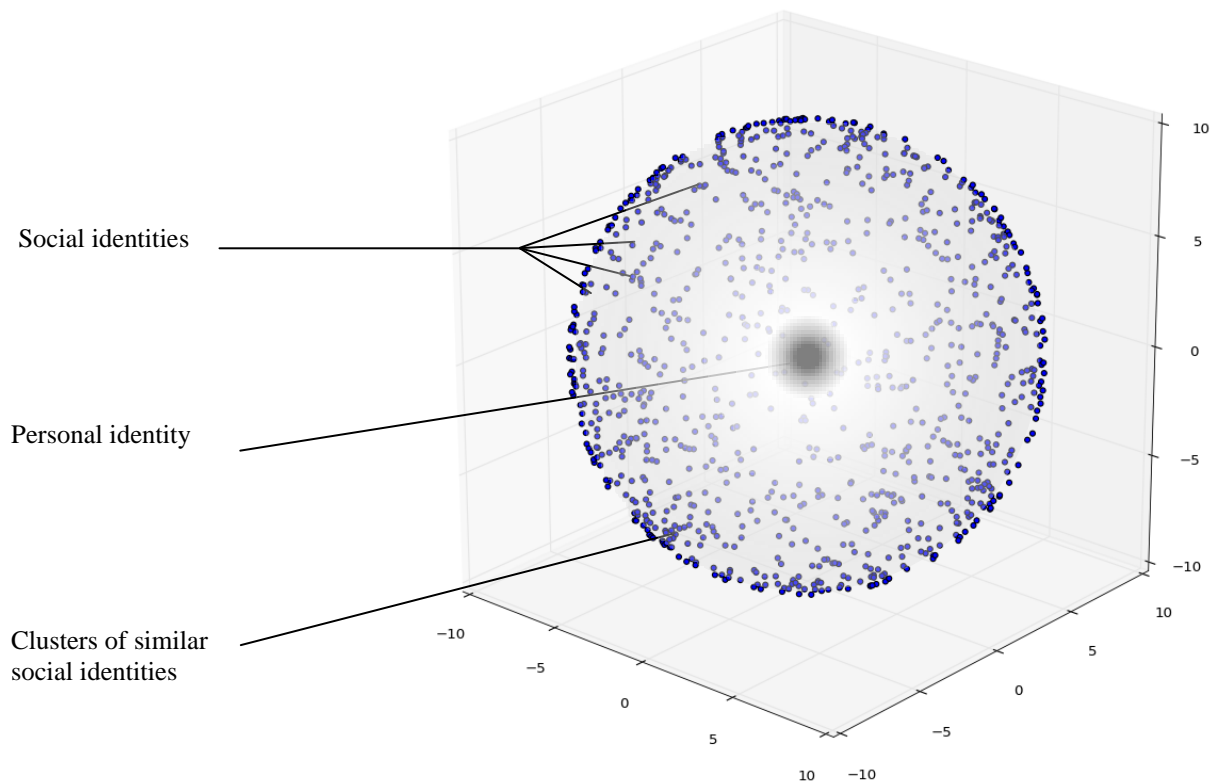


Figure 2: *A 3-dimensional representational space of an individual's multiple identities, inspired by Social Identity Theory*

The individual's personal identity, which differentiates him/her from other members of those groups, and which is influenced (to different degrees) by all of his/her social identities, would be situated somewhere towards the centre of the space. It might even be slightly off-centre, if certain social identities are considered more important than others for that individual's personal identity. In a given interaction, the individual may be seen at a given moment in the light of a particular cluster of identities: the actual representation of the individual at that moment could be represented graphically by a point within the sphere (figure 2), somewhere between the different activated social identities and their personal identity.

This type of multi-dimensional model, inspired by SIT, can help us to illustrate the tensions not only between social and personal identities, but also between the different social identities attributed to an individual. It gives us insights into how that individual may be considered by others at a given moment in an interaction (as a representation situated somewhere within the three-dimensional sphere), according to the various identities activated in the context.

However, although it is a psychological theory of identity, SIT places its main emphasis on our perceptions of others and the consequences of these perceptions on our interactions. In doing so, it doesn't focus directly on questions such as the self-image that an individual tries to project in that interaction, or indeed on the way interlocutors may co-construct different identities through the intersubjective process. A separate theoretical framework is needed in order to take such questions into account.

Identity Theory

The intersubjective dimension of the interpersonal communication process has been studied on the micro-sociological level, by the symbolic interactionist tradition, which can be traced back to George Herbert Mead's work on social behaviourism (1934) and Charles Horton

Cooley's "Looking Glass Self" (1902), inspired by the idea that our self-image results from the way we "see ourselves through others' eyes", via our interpretations of their reactions to us during our interactions.

The early symbolic interactionists focused not on social identities but on role identities: those linked to the different roles we play in a given social situation, based on the associated social expectations. Contrary to dominant positions in sociology and in psychology at the time, they defended the now widely-accepted idea that individual behaviour is not dictated by social structure: rather, it is through social interactions that we negotiate and maintain social structure. Social structure thus constitutes an incrementally-evolving backdrop to the stage on which social actors play out their interactions in *commedia dell'arte* type improvisation. In the words of Herbert Blumer, one of the prominent and well-known "Chicago school" symbolic interactionists: "the most important feature of human association is that participants take each other into account" (Blumer 1969, 108). Using participant observation, symbolic interactionists sought to build up an understanding of how participants negotiate the conditions of their interaction, including their respective identities.

Developed to examine the use of identities in interactions, Identity Theory (IT) can be traced back to one particular strand of symbolic interactionism: that of Sheldon Stryker and his "Social Structural Version" (Stryker 1980), inspired in part by Manfred Kuhn and the "Iowa School". Following Kuhn, Stryker was keen to address certain contemporary criticisms of symbolic interactionism, namely that it:

- went too far in neglecting social structure
- rejected traditional (quantitative) scientific methods
- constituted a loose theoretical framework rather than a testable theory.

Identity Theory sought to overcome these "weaknesses". First developed by Stryker (1987), then elaborated upon notably by Peter Burke and colleagues (Stryker and Burke 2000; Burke et al. 2003; Burke and Stets 2009), the theory considers that each individual has a complex self, made up of the many different identities used in their everyday interactions. As Stryker points out:

Cultural definitions of roles are often vague and contradictory; consequently, cultural definitions provide at best a very general framework within which one can construct his or her own lines of action. That being the case, actors will have to make their roles and then communicate to others what roles they are playing (Stryker 1980, 107).

For identity theorists, identities are thus idiosyncratic (specific to each individual rather than common to a social group or role),² and co-constructed or negotiated during interactions, on the basis of a loosely-defined set of cultural/social role-expectations or "identity standards", which individuals choose to play out in particular ways. These socially-recognisable identity standards constitute what Mead (1934) terms the "Me", whereas the "identity" that the individual develops based on a particular standard can be seen as the expression of the "I", which is then verified (accepted by others), or not, in the interaction. In the terminology of IT scholars, identities are "verified" if others appear to accept or validate them through their actions and words. The theory also refers to Mead's notion of "role-taking", or putting oneself in the place of others to try anticipate their likely reactions to various lines of action, and

² This is a key conceptual and terminological difference with between IT and SIT: for the latter, a social identity engenders a set of social expectations common to (and identical for) all members of a particular group, and it is through the personalisation process that individuals distinguish themselves. For a comparison of the two theories, cf. (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995) or (Frame 2013, 297–305).

“altercasting”: the idea that our actions towards others impose upon them certain reciprocal positions, behaviours or roles.

Identity Theorists classify an individual’s identities according to three (partially overlapping) types: social identities, role identities and person identities. Social identities are based on belonging to groups: they may be national, professional, associative, etc.; role identities come from the roles we play in given situations: father, friend, carer...; while person identities express character traits we associate with ourselves: generous, intelligent, or efficient. Person identities³ are sometimes presented in a meta-position which can lead them to affect other identities: for example, a person who considers themselves “generous” will tend to play their other identities in a “generous” way. This idea of seeking coherency between identity traits will be developed later.

Despite the fact it takes into account the multiple identities associated with an individual, and might thus appear adapted to an intersectional approach to interactions, Identity Theory works on the assumption that we do not show all of our identities at the same time. Indeed, the theory considers that an individual’s various identities can be structured in what is termed a “salience hierarchy” and much work has aimed to outline the conditions which will cause an identity to become “salient” (be presented as the individual’s main identity) in a given situation. Salience, according to the theory, is linked to (a) an identity’s chances of being validated in that particular social context and by the people present, and (b) its perceived importance for the individual. The underlying motivator is self-esteem, since individuals seek to verify identities which they consider important, in order to generate a positive self-image and gain in self-esteem⁴.

Intersectionality

Such an approach is, however, clearly problematic from the point of view of intersectional scholars, who defend a position which states that we cannot understand the situation of members of multiple minority groups unless we take simultaneously into consideration their different identity facets. More broadly, scholars of intersectionality focus on the level of individuals, looking at how different identities (gender, ethnic, sexual and others) may compound discriminatory factors. They generally denounce categorisation as reductive and discriminatory, suggesting that individuals should be approached holistically rather than as (representative) members of whatever groups. There is a vibrant debate in intersectionality literature concerning the appropriate stance to take towards categorisation when analysing the complexity of social phenomena. According to Harry J. Van Buren III (2015, 318–9), three different perspectives can be distinguished in intersectionality research:

- “Intercategorical complexity”: categories are accepted as a social given but their intersections are studied in order to move beyond simple mono-category-based analyses and better understand the experience of individuals who simultaneously face discrimination on several grounds.

³ The term “person identities” is used here to differentiate these from “personal” identity as employed by scholars using SIT. In reality, Peter Burke, Jan Stets and Linda Smith-Lovin seem to use the terms “person identity” and “personal identity” interchangeably in their different publications.

⁴ For more details see Stryker and Burke 2000 or Stryker 2007. The edited volume published in 2003, under the title *Advances in Identity Theory and Research*, presents several calls for work looking into simultaneous activation of multiple identities, and the chapter by Linda Smith-Lovin (2003) provides some useful insights, as does an article by Stets and Harrod published the following year (2004) but this work does not seem to have given rise to further publications, either in scientific journals or in the 2009 collective volume *Identity Theory* published by the OUP (Burke and Stets 2009).

- “Anticategorical complexity”: categories are seen as reductive and so need to be deconstructed and cast aside in order to adopt a more complex vision of individuals, their networks and interrelationships.
- “Intracategorical complexity”: categories are reductive and need to be deconstructed, but they are also widely used in society and performative in nature, meaning that their influence should be taken into account when analysing social dynamics associated with discrimination.

It should be noted that intersectionality scholars tend to focus not on identity use in given interactions, but rather on the experience of the individual who accumulates several minority identities, how (s)he may seek to manage these intersecting identities, and the discrimination (s)he may suffer as a result. If we seek to apply these three (complementary?) positions to our micro-analysis of face-to-face interactions, they seem to highlight different aspects which may usefully be taken into account.

The approach characterised as “intracategorical complexity” may immediately seem the most helpful when applied to interpersonal communication, since it recognises that individuals do indeed tend to use categories (however reductive) to represent others, and that several of these categories may be seen to be salient in a given situation. An intracategorical approach to intersectionality reminds us that categories we project upon ourselves and others are essentialising social constructs. At the same time, it offers tools to conceptualise how individuals may play on different categories (social identities) in their interactions: in order to project a certain image and appear predictable to others as a member of a certain group or in a certain role, but also sometimes to underline shared belonging.

The standpoint of “anticategorical complexity” encourages us to reject the macro level and to focus rather on the micro-social level, the context and the individuals involved in a given interaction without reducing them to their social identities. This is salutary insofar as this approach encourages us not only to look for the various (other) identities which may come into play in a given interaction, linked for example to the situation itself, but also to pay attention to the personal dimension (*supra*) of the individuals concerned. The approach may also appear problematic when applied to microsocial interactions, however, since it seems to neglect what Pierre Bourdieu calls our “representations of reality” (“*la représentation du réel*”) (Bourdieu 1980): the fact that the categories which we use to think affect the way we experience reality. Although social categories are a social construct, we need to take into account these social constructs as part of the reality which is being studied.

Finally, adopting an “intercategorical” stance may involve focussing on the complexity not of identities, but of the underlying identity traits which may or may not be shared by various identities, and thus may be more or less strongly associated with various individuals, depending on the multiple categories or “labels” which are socially attributed to them. This approach also seems promising, and will be developed in the following section.

Towards an intersectional approach to interpersonal interactions

How then, might scholars go about drawing on the various conceptual frameworks associated with identity, presented above, in order to better understand interpersonal communication as a dynamic process structured by the use of multiple identities during interactions? This final section seeks to draw together the different approaches in order to outline an operational model.

When starting from the premise that individuals refer to multiple identities in order to make sense of and for one another, it can be useful to focus not on what identity (or identities) individuals may try to put forward, but on how they can be seen as trying to manage the coherency of the different identities simultaneously activated, i.e. all of the identities that

other people knew about and hence may refer to in the given situation. As George McCall and Jerry Simmons point out, in their symbolic interactionist approach to “identities in interactions” (1966) which is very close to that of Stryker (1980), it is often very hard for the external observer to separate these identities:

In the typical concrete interaction, the “working consensus” arrived at is such that several identities of each of the interactors are involved. Usually the several identities are so blended together in the unfolding interaction that they can be separated only analytically. (G. J. McCall and Simmons 1966, 125).

Indeed, we can even question whether such “analytical” separation of “blended” identities is a desirable outcome, since this would be a largely artificial *post factum* exercise with arguably little bearing on the phenomenological intersubjectivity of the interaction itself. Rather than putting the emphasis back on separating out individual identities, be they social identities, role identities, or person identities, we would like to suggest that an intersectional approach (in the “intercategorical” sense outlined above) to an interaction might usefully shift the focus of analysis from identities to *identity traits* which may be shared to a greater or lesser extent between different identities. An identity trait is defined here as *discourse or behaviour (symbolic acts) likely to be attributed to one or more identities*.

In any interaction, identities pertaining to a particular individual may be activated or triggered by a variety of factors. They can be:

- linked to the situation or social context itself (role identities and some social identities);
- put forward intentionally by the individual who is trying to give a certain image of him/herself (person identities, but also role and social identities);
- triggered unintentionally through various cues such as one’s appearance or communication style, either linguistic (what is said, and how: accent, register, vocabulary, voice, tone, and so on) or extralinguistic (gestures, use of space, facial expressions, etc.);
- projected onto the individual by others (altercasting).

Moreover, some identities can be very ephemeral and contextually dependent as individuals continuously define themselves in different contexts, based on a whole range of different subjective criteria, for instance: people who live locally as opposed to ‘outsiders’, people who have seen such and such a film, who use PCs or Macs, passengers who are frustrated about their train being late, and so on.

Each identity, as a socially-recognisable construct, suggests certain traits with which the individual must compose, and the complexity of human interactions, the “identity game” we each play, is to manage these different possibilities while simultaneously trying consciously or unconsciously to (a) maintain coherency and (b) pursue various goals or objectives through the intersubjective encounter itself.

The notion of *coherency* as used here is linked to the symbolic interactionist / ethnomethodological concepts of subjectivity (Quéré 1969), predictability and accountability (Garfinkel 1967). In simple terms, individuals must present a coherent image of themselves in an interaction, and even between interactions, in order to be taken seriously, i.e. to establish themselves as credible subjects in the conversation, thereby convincing the other participants that they master sufficiently the dominant social norms to be able to take part in “facework” (Goffman 1992) and not constitute an intersubjective threat. By implicitly foregrounding certain identity traits (behaviour or discourse consistently attributable to certain identities),

they can increase their predictability and, if necessary, give account for their opinions or behaviour by linking these explicitly to the identities in question.

The choice of the identity traits which are foregrounded by an individual is likely to be linked to their compatibility with the various activated identities and also the perceived importance of these identities to the situation and for the individual. The identity theorists' notion of "salience hierarchy" (*supra*) would suggest that identities which are psychologically more important for an individual, or to which (s)he has more "commitment" in the terminology of the theory (Burke and Stets 1999), will tend to be more readily chosen, *especially if a particular trait (behaviour or discourse) is simultaneously attributable to several such identities*⁵.

The choice of identity traits may also be influenced by the "goals" which an individual is pursuing in a given interaction. Such "goals" may be more or less consciously pursued and may take on a whole variety of guises, for example (i) the subjective aspiration to maintain a positive self-image (Cast and Burke 2002) by having certain identities "validated" and dealing with altercasting, (ii) the objective outcome of commercial negotiations, or (iii) relationship management. However, as Peter Burke points out, we most often have fairly little control of what actually happens during an encounter, and as such "it seems to make little sense to speak of "rational action" or "planned behavior". Instead we need to talk about the goal states that our behavior accomplishes in spite of disturbances, disruptions, interruptions, accidents, and the contrivances of others." (Burke 2004, 6). Moreover, many of our "goals" are not rationally calculated and it seems more reasonable to talk rather about individuals reacting to *perceived opportunity structures*: trying to make the most of a given situation, in the light of a whole range of potential outcomes they perceive as being more or less desirable.

From a phenomenological point of view, it would appear that the subjective experience associated with the identity traits we choose to put forward is more commonly not that we are continuously making strategic calculations, but rather that we act in a certain way because we have the impression that our behaviour reflects "who we are", or at least the image of ourselves we want to give, consciously or unconsciously. Despite the ongoing unconscious process of role-taking, the degree of conscious reflexivity individuals exhibit in a given interaction can thus vary greatly from one moment to the next⁶. Moreover, identity theorists underline our affective attachment to identities, which may in turn constitute a limit to the degree of reflexive control that an individual may be able to muster, when faced with a situation in which an identity (s)he feels strongly about is perceived as being wrongly portrayed in some way. For example, an individual might speak out to disagree with someone who criticises and identity they hold dear, even though this may in turn threaten the intersubjective relationship and would not appear to be in their objective interest. Alternatively, someone may "show their true colours" in a discussion, betraying a sexist or racist point of view, for example, inspired by their underlying resentment towards the group in question, once again without exercising reflexive control over their "gut" reaction.

From this discussion, it should have become clear that there are limits to our capacity for conscious reflexivity or identity management. Generally speaking, we do not coldly calculate and perform the traits and identities which will be staged in a given interaction. Nor do we control the way in which various traits may be interpreted by our interlocutors. Despite the existence of a set of more-or-less shared social representations and norms, their interpretation

⁵ This discussion of coherency amongst identities and identity traits can be linked here to the work done by various symbolic interactionist scholars on "role strain" (see Thoits 2003 for an overview), even though this notion has most often been applied to the psychological stress associated with conflicting identities, rather than to questions of compatible or incompatible identity traits.

⁶ For further discussion of this point, cf. (Frame 2014b).

of our behaviour will depend on their particular vision of these and of us (previous knowledge, past encounters, etc.), and also on a very broad “figurative” context, marked by all of the immediate constraints weighing on the interaction (space and time constraints, external pressures to succeed, power relations, physiological states, etc.). If we have the impression someone is rushed, tired, or stressed, or has drunk too much, for example, we take this into account in decoding their behaviour in terms of their identities⁷. The way we perform and interpret identity traits is thus both contextual, in that their possible meaning is influenced by the situation, those present, and what has been said and done so far, and also culturally underpinned: participants in an interaction refer to a set of more-or-less shared social representations and norms, “identity standards”, which can also take into account stereotypes, power differences, intergroup rivalries, and so on (*cf.* Frame and Boutaud 2010).

Conclusion

In this chapter, it has been shown that the simultaneous activation of multiple identities constitutes a challenge for all theories of identity (or identities) discussed here. Yet each conceptual framework also provides its own unique insights into this process. Social Identity Theory focuses primarily on the extent to which an individual is seen, at different moments, as being more or less typical of a particular social group to which (s)he is considered to belong. By multiplying the social identities which can potentially be foregrounded (simultaneously), the theory can be used to represent a three-dimensional “identity space”, structured by the individual’s various social identities on the basis of their relative numbers of shared traits. It is suggested that the image of an individual for another at a given point in a social interaction can be represented as a point within this space, somewhere between their personal identity and their various social identities. Identity Theory encourages us to add to this the notion of “role identity”, to take into account the image that the individual is trying to defend, and the relative importance of various identities for him/her as sources of self-esteem. Finally, intersectional research reminds us that categories, or identities, are neither mutually-exclusive, nor do they correspond to objective reality. Rather, identities should be seen as social constructs with reference to which individuals seek to position themselves and others for relational (symbolic) and sense-making (semiotic) purposes. It has been suggested that one way in which they may do this is to foreground certain identity traits, most often ones which appear compatible with several activated (but otherwise potentially “conflicting”) identities.

Yet the discussion of intentionality and of the fact that traits may be interpreted in different ways by different people, despite the situational and cultural underpinnings of this process, points to a limit of the approach outlined here. Since all individuals are susceptible to differ, to a certain degree, in the way they interpret particular traits and attribute them or not to given identities, it becomes clear that the whole analysis of any social situation based on identity traits is an artificial construct dependent on the researcher’s own subjective interpretations. It follows that the objective of such an approach is not to seek to establish a possible “truth” about the identity traits mobilised in a given encounter, which would be in contradiction with the social constructionist vision which has inspired this study. Rather, the point being made is that, in pursuing the intersubjective goal of accountability as outlined by the ethnomethodologists, we consider it more likely that individuals in a typical social situation operate consciously and unconsciously to evaluate coherency between identities on the level of the *trait*, rather than choosing one particular *identity* and trying to play it out, as the other theoretical models (SIT, IT) would tend to suggest. Thus, in the process of role-taking, when we anticipate others’ interpretations and reactions to a given line of action (words or deeds),

⁷ The notion of “figurative context” and its role in interpersonal communication is further developed in Frame 2012 or Frame 2014a.

the suggestion made in this paper is that we do not focus on a single identity, but rather seek to gauge how the envisaged behaviour might be assessed in the light of various activated identities, possibly tending to choose traits which are compatible with the most possible activated identities, and in any case being ready to justify them in the light of certain identities as opposed to others.

Such a trait-based approach to the intersubjective conceptualisation of multiple identities was originally outlined in the author's PhD thesis (Frame 2008). Recent criticism of the concept of intersectionality, plus the frequently expressed need to take into account multiple identities when studying interpersonal or intercultural interactions, seem to indicate the potential of such an approach, which can be used to bypass simple dichotomies by looking more closely at the components of various identities, and the way individuals might seek to position themselves and others in relation to these, during specific encounters. The objective of this chapter was to make this case, by seeking to articulate the various theoretical frameworks commonly evoked when studying identities in interactions. However, it is clear that the approach outlined here now needs to be formulated in terms of empirically testable hypotheses, and that empirical studies should be carried out to determine whether the approach can indeed shed new light on research questions pertaining to the way we manage our different identities in our everyday interpersonal interactions.

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