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Identity, social groups and communication: some frontiers for theory and research

ABSTRACT

The recent flourishing in discourses on identity in the social sciences as well as the fact that struggles of identity have become the paradigmatic form of social and political conflict in the modern world form the contextual framework of this article. Firstly, it explores the development of theorising and research on identity in a sister discipline of Communication Science, namely Psychology, and specifically the development of social identity theory that acknowledges the vital role of social groups in identity processes. Furthermore, it explores how some subdisciplines of Communication Science deal with identity issues and, more specifically, with the role of social identities in communication-related phenomena. An alternative theoretical framework for the study of communication and identity is discussed. Finally, attention is given to the way in which processes associated with identity could influence communication-related phenomena and could be incorporated in the theorising and research within various subdisciplines of Communication Science.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of identity as a focus of interest in the social sciences has been noted and discussed by various authors and analysts (Bauman, 2001; Calhoun, 1994; Hall, 1996a, 1996b; Rouse, 1995). In 1996, prominent British cultural scientist Stuart Hall (1996a:1) referred in this regard to a “veritable discursive explosion” since the last decades of the twentieth century. Approximately five years later, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2001:140) responded that this “explosion” of the identity discourse noted by Hall had triggered an “avalanche” since 1996.

Indeed, few other aspects of contemporary life have succeeded in attracting the same amount of academic interest in recent years. Bauman (2001) points out that interest in identity is not restricted to so-called ‘identity studies’. Although largescale and wide-ranging differences in the conceptualisation, definition and theorising of the concept of ‘identity’ occur across disciplines, this concept has become the lens through which most other aspects of contemporary life are studied. Even established issues of social analysis are refurbished and reformulated to fit into the identity discourse. Thus, discussions on ‘justice’ and ‘equality’ are debated in terms of ‘recognition’; the concept of ‘culture’ is studied in terms of individual, group and/or categorical differences and concepts such as ‘creolisation’ and ‘hybridity’; and political discourses often centre on individual or group rights. Rouse (1995) furthermore points out that the study of identity is not limited to the formation, development and consequences of identity for the individual. It has also become the primary medium for understanding and explaining the relationship between the personal (subjective) and the social, the individual and the group, the cultural and the political, as well as the group and the state.

Discourses on identity are not restricted to academic circles. Struggles of identity have become an integral component of interpersonal processes as well as social and political conflict (Calhoun, 1994). This has increasingly been associated with the social struggles of people of colour and various dominated or repressed groups. These pursuits – labelled ‘identity politics’ – are collective, not merely individual, and public, not only private. Singh (1997) draws the conclusion that these struggles became the paradigmatic form of social, political and cultural conflict in the late twentieth century.

Bauman (2001) ascribes the spectacular rise of the identity discourse to human experience in the modern age. He uses the image of human perception that often tends to notice things only when they disappear or stop behaving as monotonously as they did before. Similarly, the current obsession with the identity discourse is an indication that circumstances in the modern world have not only changed the processes of identity formation, but have added new dimensions to both personal and collective identity.

Whereas past generations apparently handled identity formation and related problems and issues in a matter-of-fact way, new dimensions have been added to old problems. Furthermore, whereas the term identity implies continuity, that is a solid basis in which people anchor themselves, the rapid changes that characterise the age of globalisation eroded most of the bases on which people used to anchor their identity. The age-old 'problem of identity' has thus changed its shape and content.

Although it is not the purpose of this article to explore the reasons for the recent flourishing of identity discourses, the conclusion can be drawn that the relevance of any social science within the current age will depend to an extent on the way in which it engages itself with issues of, and discourse on, identity. This also applies to Communication Science. This article explores developments in the discourse on identity in one of the sister disciplines of Communication Science, namely Psychology. It focuses in particular on social-psychological explanations of identity and the concomitant implications and consequences. It then looks at the extent to, and the way in, which some of the subdisciplines of Communication Science deal with issues of identity and the role of social groups in particular. Furthermore, it explores some frontiers for theorising and research on identity in Communication Science.

2. INDIVIDUALISTIC AND SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY WITHIN THE DISCIPLINE OF PSYCHOLOGY

Although identity has been a central concern of Western philosophy since the eighteenth century and a key concept in psychology for over a hundred years, it has only become a major interest of psychologists in the twentieth century.

2.1 Individualistic explanations of identity

The term identity itself began to gain salience within Psychology as a discipline in the late 1940s and 1950s with the work of Erik Erikson (1968). As a clinical and developmental psychologist within the Freudian tradition, Erikson's work focuses on the development of identity during certain life stages such as adolescence. Erikson associates identity as a definition of personhood with sameness or continuity of the self across time and space. He typifies a healthy state of identity development as an invigorating subjective awareness of sameness and continuity. In addition to continuity, other theorists also identify uniqueness as a defining criterion of identity. Uniqueness involves those elements or characteristics that distinguish a particular person from other people or the whole of mankind (Baumeister, 1986; Erikson, 1968; Murguía, Padilla & Pavel 1991; Rouse, 1995).

Erikson's conceptualisation of identity (1968) focuses mainly on identity development in the individual. This emphasis on the individual as the primary unit of analysis has been dominating not only Psychology, but also other social sciences for a long time. Within this tradition, even social processes are explained predominantly in terms of individual or interindividual dynamics. The following quotation from Berkowitz (1962:167) illustrates the individualistic orientation in the social sciences with an example from the field of intergroup relations and conflict:

... the present writer is... inclined to emphasize the importance of individualistic considerations in the field of group relations. Dealings between groups ultimately become problems of the psychology of the individual. Individuals decide to go to war; battles are fought by individuals; and peace is established by individuals... Theoretical principles can be formulated referring to a group as a unit and these can be very helpful in understanding hostility between groups. But such abstractions refer to the collections of people and are made possible by inter-individual uniformities in behaviour.

Despite his primary focus on the individual, Erikson (1968) recognises the social environment in the development of identity. He emphasises the role of interaction with significant others such as parents, the family group and finally with membership groups in identity development. However, social groups are still perceived as a context to identity development rather than active role-players in the process.

2.2 Social groups and identity

Social groups first gained a more prominent role in psychological theories on the formation of identity in the 1980s with the work of a group of British social psychologists under the leadership of Henri Tajfel (1981). Tajfel's social identity theory originated from the famous so-called minimal group experiment (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy & Flament, 1971). The participants in this experiment were a group of British schoolboys who were divided into two groups. Although the impression was created that the group division was based on the boys' preference for the work of two famous artists, the group division was, in fact, done on a purely random basis. Each boy was informed of his own group membership, but did not know who the other members of his own or the members of the other group were. The boys were given a task in which they had to allocate money to two other people – one a member of the own group and the other a member of the other group. Codes A and B were used to distinguish between the two groups. The task consisted of various choice matrixes where each column represented an alternative rule according to which money could be allocated to two people – one a member of the ingroup and the other a member of the outgroup. For each choice matrix, the boys had to make a choice

between the rules for dividing the money. They were led to believe that the representative of each group would receive the money allocated to him by the other participants.

The boys completed the task individually in separate cubicles. There was consequently no contact or interaction between the members of the various groups. As they never allocated money to themselves, they could not gain personally from the selection of particular options. Due to the fact that the two groups were created within the experimental situation, they had no history of relations. Factors such as cultural or other differences, intergroup competition or past conflict, or any other factor associated with intergroup tension could not play a role in the way in which they responded to the matrix task. As none of the boys knew who the members of their own or the members of the other group were, factors such as personal preference could play no role in their choices.

The results came as a surprise to the experimenters. It was found that the boys discriminated consistently in favour of their own group. Furthermore, they gave preference to alternatives (or allocation rules) in which there was the largest difference between the amount allocated to the member of the ingroup and the amount allocated to the outgroup member. In fact, not only did they discriminate consistently by allocating more money to the member of the ingroup than to the outgroup member; but they were also even willing to allocate less money to the ingroup member in favour of maximising the difference between the amount allocated to the ingroup and the outgroup member. It appears that a winning motive focused on the ingroup, rather than the intention to maximise gains, dominated their responses. Tajfel and his colleagues (1971) reached the conclusion that the division of the boys into two groups – and the group categorisation per se – gave rise to the bias towards the ingroup in the boys' responses.

The minimal ingroup experiment of Tajfel and his colleagues (1971) was followed by numerous similar studies in various countries in which the results were replicated extensively for various age groups and nationalities. In a follow-up study, Billig and Tajfel (1973) found, for example, that participants were willing to discriminate in favour of the ingroup even when they were fully aware of the fact that the group categorisation was done on a random basis. The fundamental conclusion to which all these studies led was that when people are divided into a group – any group – they tend to think immediately, automatically and almost reflexively of that group as their own group (or ingroup). Thus, awareness of group membership per se gives rise to various forms of social behaviour, the most conspicuous of which are attempts to place the ingroup in a better position than the relevant outgroups.

The results of the minimal group experiment led to a reconceptualisation of the concept of identity and the role of social groups in Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory. According to the social identity theory, the self-concept of the individual consists of two parts – personal and social identity. Personal identity bears relation to self-definitions in terms of unique personal characteristics such as personality, and physical and intellectual characteristics. Social identity, on the other hand, is that part of the individual's self-concept formed by his or her awareness of membership of social groups as well as the value and emotional significance attached to such group memberships. The basic idea of the social identity theory is therefore that any social category (e.g. ethnic group, nationality, organisation or work group) within which one falls and to which one feels that one belongs, that is with which one identifies, provides a basis of self-definition in terms of the discerning characteristics of the category. Thus, membership of social groups is internalised as part of the self-concept and as such forms an integral part of individual identity. Most people have a repertoire of such group memberships that form part of their self-concept (Hogg & Terry, 2001).

Tajfel (1981) holds social categorisation, that is the division of the social world into various social categories, as the cognitive basis of social identity. Social categorisation represents an attempt by the individual to process information and stimuli from the environment and to bring order in his or her social world. Stimuli that bear resemblance to one another are grouped together in one category, while stimuli with conspicuous differences are grouped in different categories. For example, people with blond hair and blue eyes are categorised as Europeans, while people with dark hair and slanted eyes are categorised as Chinese or Asians. Once social categorisation has occurred, people tend to accentuate the similarities between members of their ingroup, while the differences between them and members of sundry outgroups are emphasised. In a similar way, people can be categorised according to their language, dialect, the way they speak or other forms of communication behaviour.

However, social categorisation per se does not define an individual's place in society. People have to identify with a group to which they belong in order to do so (Louw-Potgieter, 1991). Louw-Potgieter describes identification as a complex, social, dialectical and binding process. It is a social process as it takes place within a social environment and a specific historical context. Identification is consequently neither an isolated process nor restricted to the psyche of the individual. It is furthermore a dialectical process as the group also strives from its side to bring about and enhance the individual's identification with the group. It is also a binding process as reciprocal ties are established between the individual and the ingroup.

Brewer (1991; 1993) ascribes the lure of social groups as sources of social identification to two apparently contradictory human needs. These are, on the one hand, the need to be unique (that is to be differentiated from other people) and, on the other hand, the need for security and assimilation. Identification with social groups fulfils the need for differentiation by emphasising the unique characteristics of the own group as well as the differences between the ingroup and other groups. The need for assimilation, on the other hand, is fulfilled by the feeling of solidarity between members of a particular group. In accordance with Erikson's (1968) theory of individual identity, social identification is also associated with the notion of continuity. Membership of groups with a long history that transcends the life span of the individual bestows a sense of historical continuity to the life of the individual (Ruiz, 1990).

Once identification with a social group has occurred, the implications go much further than mere self-definition (Hogg & Terry, 2001). The representation of a particular group as a relevant social identity in people's minds implies that it does not only prescribe their attributes as members of the particular group, but also prescribes what they should think and feel and how they should behave. This is particularly the case in situations that emphasise or make a particular social identity salient. Thus, social identification has far-reaching and important attitudinal, behavioural and normative consequences.

Despite the fact that the social identity theory is still individualistic and reductionistic in many ways, the theory has revolutionised the way in which psychologists view the role of social groups in identity formation and various social and political processes. The minimal group experiment and research that followed have emphasised that social groups are not merely the context or a byproduct of identity formation, and social and political processes. In fact, social groups are increasingly recognised as active role-players in most cultural, social and political phenomena.

2.3 The social identity theory and other disciplines in the social sciences

The social identity theory has not only changed the conceptualisation of identity and its concomitant consequences within Psychology, but its influence has also spread to other disciplines such as Sociology, Political Science and Industrial Psychology. It has indeed become an important theoretical paradigm for the study of a variety of phenomena such as stereotyping, intergroup relations, motivational processes, social influence and norms, national identification, attitudes and behaviour towards the state, organisational identification, and organisational processes, etc. (Hogg & Terry, 2001). However, the important question to be answered in this article is whether theories of identity, and the social identity theory in particular, have implications for Communication Science and what these implications might be. In the following sections, some answers to these questions will be contemplated.

3. CURRENT TRENDS IN COMMUNICATION SCIENCE

Similar to the other social sciences, Communication Science is also to a large extent characterised by reductionism and individualism. Eisenberg (2001) holds that many definitions and models of communication present an overly simplistic view of human communication processes. Autonomous units with fixed boundaries are perceived as the sources, receivers and users of communication. The autonomous individual, in particular, is predominantly perceived as the receiver, consumer and/or user of all forms of communication. Furthermore, most communication theories insist that the main – if not the sole – function of human communication is uncertainty reduction within the individual that should be accomplished through the maximisation of clarity, openness and understanding. Social relationships and culture are often only recognised insofar as they form the context for the communication process or have an influence on the values, the world view and the culture of individuals (Jandt, 1998). However, there are also new developments in some subdisciplines that offer opportunities for the integration of identity – and social identity in particular – in Communication Science. Some trends are the following:

- Communication is predominantly defined as the transfer of information from the source via a channel to a(n) (individual) receiver – the so-called ‘conduit’ metaphor. Within this metaphor, the instrumentality and intentionality of communication are emphasised (Eisenberg, 2001). In a South African handbook for first-year students, larger societal groups are not even recognised as a possible context for communication processes (Steinberg, 1999). On the contrary, attention is given to other large-scale contexts such as organisations and the public domain. With regard to group membership, only small groups of three to twelve people, in which each member is able to interact with all the other members, are recognised as a viable context for communication processes.
- In theories on intrapersonal and interpersonal communication, the emphasis falls predominantly on what the terms suggest, namely the relationships of the individual with themselves and the relationship between individuals per se. In the textbook by Burton and Dimpleby (1995) used by the University of South Africa, social attributes are mentioned as one of a set of categories that defines self-esteem. However, no definition, description or explanation of social attributes is provided. On the other hand, Burton and Dimpleby go further than theorists in some of the other subdisciplines of Communication Science by giving recognition to the influence of intragroup communication among the members of reference groups. However, virtually no attention is given to identity as a relevant component of the self-concept of the individual, the implications of

identity development for interpersonal communication, the real effects of group membership for the self-concept of the individual and the effects of intragroup and intergroup communication on the individual.

- In reception theories, the focus also falls predominantly on the interaction between the individual and media texts (Pitout, 2001). Individual cognition, motivation and emotional states are regarded as the points of departure for theories on selective exposure, selective perception and media consumption in general (Festinger, 1957; Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998; Hoijer, 1992). Although the term 'identity' is sometimes used, the focus falls on individual identification with media characters rather than the nature of personal or social identity and its implications.

However, recent developments in reception theory reflect a more complex and nuanced view of the role of identity and social groups in the interpretation of media texts. In his theory of the polysemic nature of television texts, Fiske (1987) acknowledges the role of so-called 'subcultures' in the interpretation of media texts. Roscoe, Marshall and Gleeson (1995) use the term 'interpretive community' to discuss a process of negotiation within specific social and cultural communities. Hoijer (1998) describes the psycho-dynamic processes that build bridges between individual, social and cultural identities in media consumption. However, the emphasis falls more specifically on the role of the family and peer groups, while recognition of the influence and the role of larger social groups is often limited to the acknowledgement of their role in creating the cultural context in which the individual interprets media messages.

The most conspicuous acknowledgement of social groups as a relevant factor can be found in Stuart Hall's theory (1980) on the encoding and decoding of media texts. Hall criticises sender-message-receiver models of communication for the absence of the recognition of the role of complex structures of relationships. Hall emphasises the role of discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure in all phases of the coding and decoding of media texts. Of particular importance is his emphasis on discourse. Social and political structures are consequently no longer seen as the mere context of communicative processes, but as participants in these processes. Hall's alternative paradigm for the study of media reception furthermore leads to the use of alternative qualitative research methodologies in the study of media reception (Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Morley, 1980). Although some of these studies focus on the way in which membership of different educational and social groups influence media reception, the focus falls on the use of alternative research methodologies rather than on a more nuanced view of the active role of social groups and social identities on media reception.

- The uses and gratification approach focuses on the active individual media user that selects media content on the basis of personal needs and motives. The use of certain media is perceived to result in particular individual psychological rewards (Pitout, 2001; Wimmer & Dominick, 1994). Although this theory has been criticised for ignoring the social and cultural contexts of media usage (Grossberg *et al.*, 1998), few alternatives have been offered for the emphasis on individual needs. The recognition of social needs is limited to the interpersonal socialising needs of the individual, while the possibility that media usage could be related to the identity needs of both the individual and social groups is seldom contemplated.
- The predominant focus in theories on the functions of the press is on the individual and the relationship between the individual, the media and the state. Most of these theories focus on the role of the press as an active agent in informing the individual or promoting particular state interests such as democratisation, nation-building or development (Fourie, 2001). Acknowledgement of social groups is mainly limited to the principle that minority groups have a right to access to the media and the right to have their needs served by the media (McQuail, 1987).
- Theories on the functions of the film emphasise individual entertainment, while views on the social functions of the film are limited to the role of the film (and other media) to inform the individual member of the public about other lifestyles, groups and cultures; the socialisation of the individual with regard to particular (or alternative) lifestyles and the promotion of particular values (Fourie, 2001).
- The individual is perceived as the main element and/or base unit in audience and lifestyle research (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994).
- Theories on organisational communication focus mainly on the individual employee as the receiver and communicator in both upward and downward communication. However, in the interactional or so-called 'sociological' perspective on organisational communication, the influence of communication and the influence of the groups are considered. However, the type of groups concerned and the nature of the influence of groups are not well defined. The influence of group identities *per se* and the possibility and influence of cross-cutting group identities are seldom considered. In the consideration of diversity, the emphasis also falls on cultural differences rather than on awareness of group membership, group identification and the concomitant implications (Neher, 1997).
- The individual consumer is perceived as the target in the development of advertising message (Belch & Belch, 2001).

- In early development theories, the focus has been on the individual to change his or her psychological attitudes and values and to adopt innovations. Interpersonal communication, that is face-to-face communication, between an individual credible opinion leader and a potential individual adopter is regarded as important for the adoption of innovations (Rogers, 1962; 1983).

The third paradigm of development theory with its emphasis on participatory development and dialogue offers an alternative to the view of development communication as a transfer of messages from sender to recipient. However, the focus still falls on the basic needs of the individual – material and non-material (Servaes 1996; 1999). Cultural and/or social groups are often only acknowledged insofar as their culture influences the values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and lifestyles of the individual. Although the self-reliance of communities is acknowledged as a requirement for development, social groups are not explicitly acknowledged as participants in the developmental dialogue. In his critical evaluation and questioning of the objectives of development, Melkote (1996) calls for greater acknowledgement of the role of local cultures. To this call should be added the explicit acknowledgement of the needs of cultural and/or social groups and the involvement of such groups as active participants in the development process.

- Recognition of social or group identity and the role and influence of the dynamics of large-scale societal groups are usually limited to the subdiscipline of Intercultural Communication. However, within this subdiscipline, the emphasis falls largely on culture and the *differences* between cultural or other groups, for example differences in verbal and non-verbal communication patterns, language differences, perceptual differences, individualistic versus collectivistic cultures, high context versus low context cultures, and differences in uncertainty avoidance, etc. (Jandt, 1998). Although Jandt uses the term *cultural identity*, the definition of the concept is vague. It is considered as something that the individual has, or a characteristic of the individual, rather than a dynamic process with real effects.

Moreover, theories on acculturation and assimilation also focus almost exclusively on the individual. For example, in her comprehensive theory on acculturation, Kim (1988) proposes that acculturation should be viewed as a process through which the individual learns to communicate within a foreign culture. She looks at acculturation from a systems perspective and identifies four interconnected systems involved in the process: intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, mass media behaviours and the communication environment or macro-social system. However, the main emphasis is on interpersonal

communication. Virtually no recognition is given to the role that awareness of membership of particular groups – and particularly ethnic or cultural groups – as well intragroup and intergroup processes could play in acculturation and assimilation processes.

- Cultural Studies offer a more comprehensive view of communication and cultural and social relations. Morley's theory of text as a social discourse (1980) holds that our experience is made up of a number of discourses or texts through which we make sense of our reality. However, the emphasis still falls on negotiation between the individual recipient and the text. The most conspicuous contribution of Cultural Studies towards the recognition of the role of social groups can be found in Hall's theory (1980) on the encoding and decoding of media messages, which is discussed above. However, the specific nature of identity – and social identity in particular – in the encoding and decoding of media texts still needs to be outlined.

Overall, the conclusion can be drawn that Communication Science is still largely individualistic and reductionistic in its approach to the study of communication processes at all levels. The isolated individual predominantly remains the primary unit of analysis in the majority of theoretical and analytical paradigms, while the role of cultural or social groups is often merely regarded as the context of communication processes. Moreover, little cognisance is given to the role of identity and identity-related processes, and social identity in particular, in the various communication-related phenomena covered in the discipline.

4. TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE THEORY OF COMMUNICATION AND IDENTITY

4.1 Eisenberg's model for communication and identity (2001)

In recognising the limitations of current models and theories of communication, Eisenberg (2001) proposes an alternative theory for explaining communication behaviour that acknowledges identity as a vital factor in communication. He proposes a theory that connects a person's communicative choices and behaviour with his/her personal narratives; personal narratives are again connected with bodily experiences of emotionality and mood; and each of the above with the environmental resources available for the creation and sustenance of diverse elements (Figure 1). Eisenberg specifies a cyclical relationship between the three elements – communication, personal narratives, and mood – such that they mutually reinforce one another in the service of identity building. He defines 'environmental resources' or 'the surround' as the sum total of environmental influences that affect identity formation, namely:

- **Spiritual:** cosmological concepts, values and behaviour.
- **Economic:** ideas and behaviours regarding the exchange of material resources.
- **Cultural:** assumptions, values and rituals characterising social groupings.
- **Interpersonal:** rules, values and patterns of behaviour that define intimate relations.
- **Biological:** electrochemical and genetic patterns that shape human development.

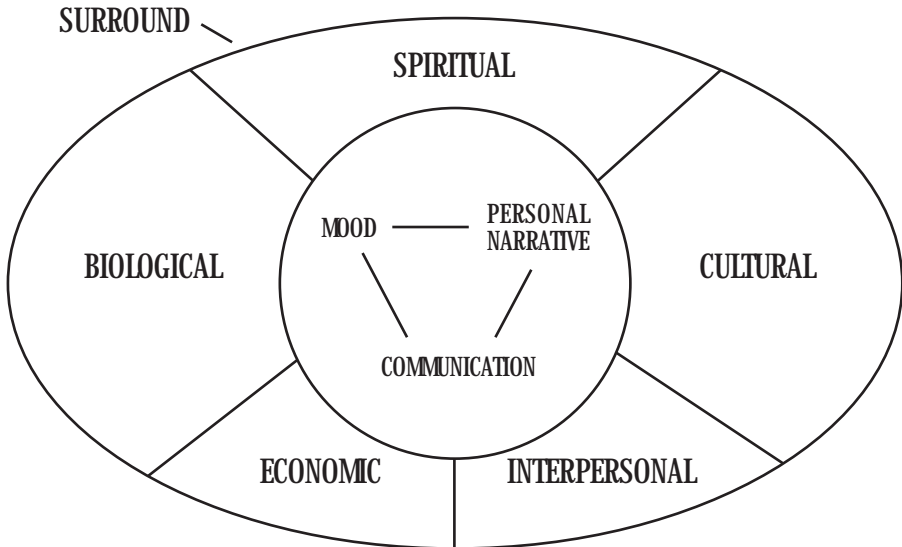


Figure 1: Eisenberg's 2001 model for communication and identity

Furthermore, Eisenberg (2001) identifies three closely related processes that comprise the ongoing process of identity formation. The first is biological in nature and bears relation to emotions, brain chemistry and mood. It can be expressed as a person's orientation towards time, whether they are hopeful or anxious, happy or depressed with regard to their present and future. The second is the ongoing authorship and editing of the person's personal narrative or life story that reflects his or her attachments, interpretations and views of his or her own possibilities. The third is the person's approach to communication with others that can vary in the degree of defensiveness or openness to the world view of others. According to Eisenberg, each of these processes can be influenced by the surround. For example, people raised in poverty will experience a surround of limitations that will colour every aspect of their lives. People of privilege, on the other hand, may experience a pervasive surround of opportunity.

Thus, communication and identity formation is viewed as a complex process in which the person draws information and stories from the environment or 'surround' that inform his or her mood, personal narrative and communicative style. The processes involved in identity formation are mutually reinforcing, and repeated patterns tend to be locked in. Change can be brought about by changing the system from almost any angle as long as the interrelationships between the subprocesses are taken into account. Failure to take cognisance of these interrelationships could, however, limit or hinder lasting change. For example, attempts to change communication behaviour will have no lasting effect when it fails to become integrated into a person's life story. Similarly, attempts to bring about mood changes through anti-depressants could have little effect if the person's personal narratives and communication behaviour do not change simultaneously. Policy changes will also have little impact on social life until the average person experiences a shift in consciousness concerning his/her position in the world.

Although Eisenberg's theory (2001) presents a more complex and non-linear view of communication for the study of identity formation, the theory is still individualistic in its approach. Social groups such as ethnic, cultural or racial groups, are still viewed as elements in the 'surround' external to the individual. Furthermore, if one studies Eisenberg's model carefully, the cultural elements associated with social groups such as cultural practices and values – and not groups per se – are emphasised as factors that could potentially influence identity formation.

4.2 An expanded model for communication and personal and social identity

If the conceptualisation of social identity as an integral part of the individual's self-concept is taken into account, an alternative or expanded model for communication and identity should be developed. Such an alternative model should make provision for at least two additional subprocesses that mediate identity formation (see figure 2), namely:

- intragroup communication: all forms of communication between the members of a particular group; and
- intergroup communication: all forms of intergroup interaction between relevant groups – or members of different groups – in a particular social environment.

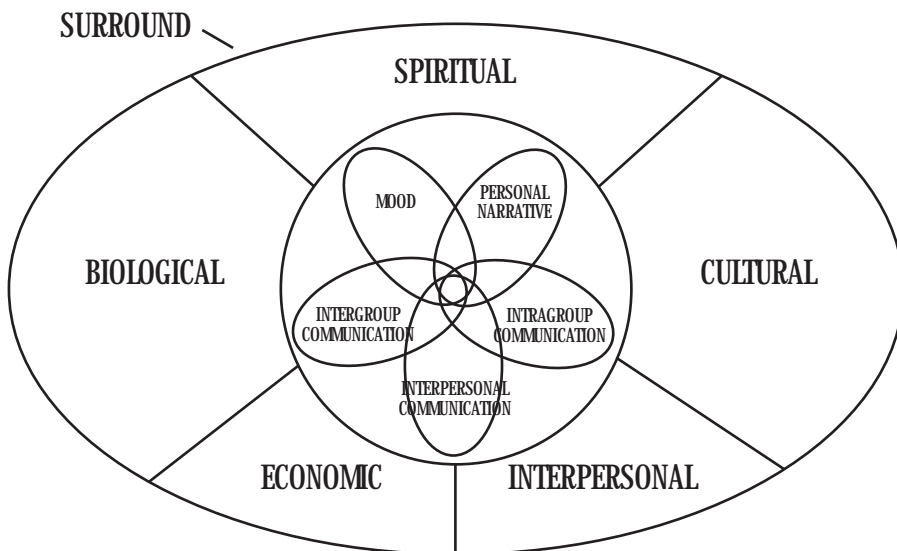


Figure 2: Alternative model for communication and the identity process

Similar to biological factors, intra personal narratives and interpersonal communication, intragroup communication could have an effect on all the other subprocesses. These processes also overlap to a certain extent. Thus, intragroup communication often forms an important part of personal narratives, etc. Furthermore, attempts at social change could have little effect if changes in intragroup narratives are not effected. Intergroup communication is also closely interrelated with the other subprocesses associated with communication and identity formation. Lasting changes at any other level could also depend to a large extent on whether the nature of intergroup communication changes simultaneously. For example, the mood, personal narratives and interpersonal behaviour of a person will largely be influenced by tension and conflict in the interaction of the own group with other groups within a particular social environment. Personal experiences of discrimination on the basis of group membership or feelings that a particular group identity is negated are fostered by intragroup discourses on the experience of discrimination. This could, in turn, give rise to feelings of depression, negative personal and group narratives as well as negative and even violent communication behaviour towards members of other groups. Attempts to change any of the other subprocesses associated with communication and identity could be in vain if no change is brought about in intragroup discourses on discrimination and/or in the relations between the relevant social groups.

This view of identity and communication does not only have implications for identity formation, but it could also have far-reaching effects for theorising and research in most of the subdisciplines of Communication Science. Some of these implications are discussed in the next section.

5. IDENTITY IN COMMUNICATION SCIENCE

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed account of how identity – and social identity in particular – should be accommodated in the various subdisciplines of Communication Science. Rather, what follows here are some loose thoughts on the implications for theory and research in a number of communication-related phenomena and subfields of the discipline.

5.1 Models of communication

Although various models of communication have developed since the advent of Communication Science as a discipline, most of these models are still based on the so-called 'conduit' metaphor, that is the conceptualisation of the transfer of a message from a communicator by means of a signal or channel to a receiver (Eisenberg, 2001; Steinberg, 1999). In the light of the previous discussions on communication and identity, the time has probably come to seriously review existing models and to consider alternative models of communication. Not only should identity and identity-related processes be considered as a relevant factor in the coding and decoding of communication messages, but social groups should also be considered as active role-players in the communication process itself.

One idea for an alternative model of communication is to conceptualise the transfer of communication along interconnected social networks such as among people with a common social identity. Within these networks, messages are spread very much like the ripple effect in a pond or the spread of an ink blot on a piece of paper. In such a model, there are no definite distinctions between communicators and recipients; every communicator is also a recipient and vice versa. The transfer or spread of messages is diffuse, non-linear and reciprocal. This is but one example of a possible alternative model. There are probably many more.

5.2 Identity and interpersonal communication

Interpersonal communication is one of the fields that one would expect to be least influenced by intragroup and intergroup communication. However, Tajfel (1981) holds that identity could indeed have far-reaching implications for communication between individuals. He situates all forms of human interaction on a bipolar continuum. One pole of the continuum behaviour – and therefore also communication behaviour – is solely

determined by personal identity and interindividual relationships. Tajfel uses the example of an intimate conversation between two lovers. The two individuals are probably attracted to each other on the basis of personal needs, preferences and characteristics. Their behaviour towards each other is primarily determined by the romantic relationship between them, while group membership is of little importance. At the other pole of the continuum, behaviour is predominantly determined by social identity. An example is soldiers at war, whose behaviour is determined by the conflict between the two groups at war and not by their personal feelings, preferences or interpersonal relationships.

However, Tajfel (1981) emphasises that behaviour is seldom solely determined by either social or personal identity. Most cases of interpersonal interaction lie somewhere between the two poles. Interaction that is determined by the social identities rather than the personal identities of the participants, is characterised by a disregard for personal likes and dislikes; the personal characteristics of the other person or the personal relationship between the participants. Only the group membership of the other person or people is important and the individual's behaviour is determined solely by the relationship between the ingroup and the outgroup. Furthermore, it is possible that the interaction between two individuals can be determined by group memberships even if no other people are present. When some factor in the interaction situation gives salience to particular social identities, even interpersonal behaviour will be determined by social identities rather than by individual characteristics and the relationship between individuals.

5.3 Social identity and the functions of the media

Jeffres (2000) conducted interesting research that sheds some light on the relationship between identity and the media. This longitudinal study on ethnic identification, ethnic behaviour, ethnic media use and the use of mainstream media was done among thirteen ethnic groups in a Midwestern metropolitan area in the USA. Surveys were conducted every four years from 1976 to 1992. Over all four surveys, the use of ethnic media correlated significantly with measures of ethnic ties, ethnic behaviour and ethnic identity. Path analyses bring Jeffres to the conclusion that ethnic media act as vehicles that support ethnic communities in retaining their attachment to their ethnic culture over time. (The pattern of effects in the reverse direction – from ethnic identity to ethnic media use – was not as clear.)

The results of Jeffres's study (2000) point to potential functions of the media beyond those covered in current theories of the functions of the press and other media. Jeffres theorises that immigrant communities, but also ethnic minorities in pluralistic societies, have fewer and fewer institutions to support their culture and identity. However, ethnic media persist. Moreover, new technologies have not only made it cheaper to publish ethnic media, but a medium like the Internet makes it possible for immigrant communities

to listen, hear and see what is published or broadcast by their ethnic group in their country of origin. Jeffres reaches the conclusion that ethnic media is a powerful force in strengthening ethnic identity and predicts that its influence will probably grow as subsequent generations of immigrants and ethnic minorities periodically reclaim and re-assert their identity within multicultural societies, the more so as the forces of globalisation increasingly mean that cultural groups are no longer confined to a particular country or geographical area but extend across the borders of existing countries and even around the world. Jeffres mentions in this regard that the past two decades have seen a revival of foreign-language newspapers in the USA.

As already mentioned, the implications for theories on the functions and effects of the media are manifold. Among others, it appears that – notwithstanding the aims of the producers of ethnic media products – the mere act of producing media products in the language of an ethnic group serves to foster and strengthen ethnic ties and identification with the particular group – even when those media attempt to adhere to the ideals of nation-building as set out in theories on the functions of the media. The implications for multicultural and heterogeneous societies are far-reaching. Furthermore, the findings of the study of Jeffres (2000) are probably only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. The reciprocal relationship between the media and societal groups is probably still a wide open field for research and the development of alternative theories.

5.4 Social identity and persuasive communication

The results of an experimental study by Duck, Hogg and Terry (1999) on the relationship between social identity and perceptions of media persuasion suggest that social identification might indeed mediate the persuasive effects of the media. The findings regarding respondents' perceptions of the influence of AIDS messages indicate that people who identify strongly with a particular social group will only be influenced by those media messages that are 'accepted' in a normative sense among members of the group. Thus, a process of intragroup communication determines which messages are acceptable to the group and could potentially influence group members. Furthermore, people will only acknowledge being influenced by media messages if the message is 'acceptable' to the ingroup. The opposite also appears to be true. Only those people who identify strongly with a group among whose members a message is regarded as 'acceptable' may acknowledge the personal impact of the messages in question. If a message is 'acceptable' to a salient reference group, the members of the group will also believe to a larger extent that it will have an impact on members of the ingroup.

Duck *et al.* (1999) reach the conclusion that these results highlight the role of identity and social groups, not only in understanding persuasion per se, but also in understanding perceptions of the persuasive impact of messages on the self and the other. The impact

is far-reaching for all subdisciplines where persuasive communication is at stake, for example advertising, political communication, development communication and health communication. Ultimately, the relationship between the individual and his or her identity groups – and possibly also the relationship between groups – will determine to a large extent his or her acceptance or rejection of persuasive messages. Messages thus might fail if they do not take cognisance of the active role of identities and social identities in particular.

5.5 Intercultural communication

Whereas theories within the subdiscipline of Intercultural Communication focus largely on the differences between the communication patterns and styles of various cultural groups, the social identity theory and Tajfel's (1981) interaction continuum suggest that the mere awareness of a group division and identification with a particular group could influence communication behaviour. It is consequently not only the differences between groups, but the mere presence of different groups that have implications for behaviour in settings such as organisations. The influence of group membership on behaviour could furthermore be enhanced if any factor highlights or emphasises group membership in a particular context. Communication problems, friction and conflict could therefore not only follow from cultural differences, but merely from the emotional significance that the participants attach to a particular group membership, the relative status positions of groups and the relationship between groups within a particular context. Diversity training should therefore address not only cultural differences, but also issues related to group membership per se (Hogg & Terry, 2001).

5.6 Organisational communication

Theorising and research into the implications of identity-related processes for organisations have gained tremendous momentum for a number of years. In a recent book, *Social identity processes in organizational contexts*, Hogg and Terry (2001) give an overview of some important issues such as organisational identification, the presence and influence of both formal and informal groups in organisations, the effect of contradictory, and overlapping or cross-cutting group membership and identities, etc. Insofar as communication behaviour in organisations forms part of organisational behaviour in general, it can be hypothesised that these and other identity-related processes have implications for organisational communication as well. Of particular importance could be the influence of intragroup and intergroup communication among members of existing societal groups present in the organisation versus the influence of communication within and between organisational groups.

6. CONCLUSION

These are but a few examples of the potential implications of identity, and social identity in particular, for Communication Science and its subdisciplines. The conclusion can be drawn that analysts, academics and researchers in all subdisciplines should seriously reconsider the implications of identity for theory and research within the particular discipline. It is especially important that social groups should no longer be regarded as only the context for communication processes. They are indeed active role-players in human communication and interaction processes on all levels.

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