Module 3
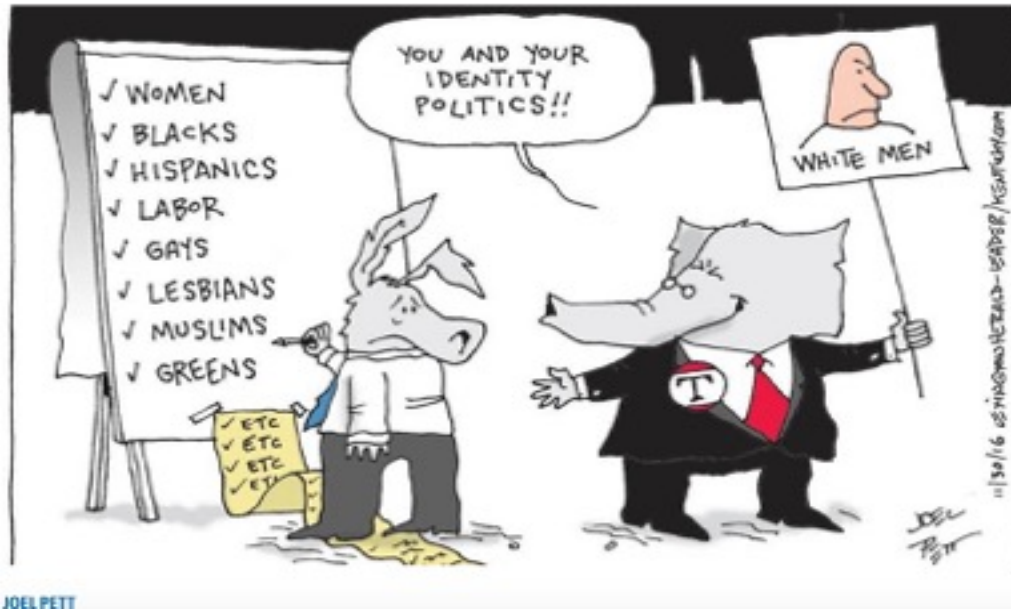
Communication and Identity Construction

Introduction

In the previous module, we learned about the use of communication to influence attitudes and behavior. In this module, we will learn about how communication influences identity and vice-versa. That is, we will explore perspectives on the dynamics between communication and identity where identity is viewed as a social process rather than an outcome that we communicate to others. From this standpoint, our personal identity or our notion of self "arises in communication with others," as philosopher George Herbert Mead once said, and individual as well as collective identities are constructed rather than innate.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this module, you should be able to:

1. Explain the process of identity construction in and through communication; and

2. Analyze issues in the construction of personal and collective identities using concepts from the communication theory of identity, positioning theory, and related perspectives.

1.0 What is identity?

According to Djite (as cited in Versluys, n.d., p. 6), identity is "the everyday word for people's sense of who they are." This sense of oneself is formed through our interactions with others. Since we are social beings who interact with and relate with others as members of social groups and communities, our identity is not stable and unitary but shifting and multiple. At the simplest level, this is evident in the fact that our self-concept and others' conception of us are not necessarily one and the same. Consider this remark by the sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1985):

> at different times in my thirty years in England, I have been "hailed" or interpel-lated as "coloured," "West-Indian," "Negro," "black," "immigrant." Sometimes in the street; sometimes at street corners; sometimes abusively; sometimes in a friendly manner; sometimes ambiguously.
>
> In fact, I "am" not one or another of these ways of representing me, though I have been all of them at different times and still am some of them to some degree. But, there is no essential, unitary "I"—only the fragmentary, contradictory subject I become. (p.108-109)

This example shows that a person's identity is shaped by his/her relationships with others, it is fluid rather than fixed, and it is political as well as personal.

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Activity 1

Draw a diagram showing the labels that you use to refer to or identify yourself, and the labels that others use to identify you. Reflect on the following questions:

1. What is the basis for the labels you use to refer to yourself?
2. Which of other people's labels for you do you identify with and why? Which of these labels do you not identify with and why?
3. How did/do you become aware of other people's notions of you? And how do others' notions of you affect your concept of self?

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Our self-identity is influenced to a large extent by how others see us, and we form our self-identity in the process of interacting with other people. This view of how identity is formed is distinct from the liberal-humanist perspective of identity as something that is essential or innate. Rather, from the perspective of the **Communication Theory of Identity (CTI)** developed by Michael Hecht and his colleagues, identity is a social process and identity is constructed in and through communication.

Activity 2

Read the following articles (available at the COMM 10 course site on your CU's VLE) and answer the study questions below.

Hecht, ML. (2009). Communication theory of identity. In SW Littlejohn & KA Foss (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Communication Theory*, pp. 139-141. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Jung, E & Hecht, ML. (2004). Elaborating the communication theory of identity: Identity gaps and communication outcomes. *Communication Quarterly*, *52*, 265-283.

Study questions:

1. How is identity a social process?
2. How is identity constructed through communication? What are the processes in identity construction in and through communication?
3. What is the layered or framed perspective on identity? What does each frame encompass? How do the frames interpenetrate? Can you think of a situation that shows interpenetration between and among identity frames?
4. Jung and Hecht (2004) wrote about dialectical tensions in the interpenetration of the frames. What does this mean? Drawing from your observations and personal experiences, what example can best explain this dialectical tension?

2.0 The process of identity construction

CTI posits that a person's identity is constructed in the process of interacting and communicating with others. Identity is constructed in and through language, and communication define our identity both directly and indirectly. Directly in the sense that we employ linguistic codes, such as naming and kinship terminologies, to describe and assign macro- and micro characteristics to ourselves, others, and groups of people, that also serve as our orienting grid under different contexts. Indirectly, communication defines us when we internalize judgements of ourselves, others, and social groups based on our way of expressing ourselves. In this continuous process of identity construction, some of the conceptions that we form about ourselves and others that prove relevant to existing social structures are maintained; those that have changed over time are refabricated; and those that are no longer relevant to the current conditions are replaced. Thus, identity is dynamic rather than static, and multiple rather than singular.

Hecht identifies four loci or frames of identity: the personal, enacted, relational, and communal. These frames help us to understand identity as a multifaceted social entity nested in different levels. The personal frame concerns our self-cognitions (including self-image and self-concept) or sense of being. All personal dispositional characteristics that help us to make sense of who we are belong to this frame. The enacted frame covers the performance and outward expressions of identity. How we formulate messages to express our identity belongs to this frame or layer. The relational frame explains identity as something that is embedded in our relationships with others. In the communal frame identities become a shared vision of "personhood" for a collective. In this process, identities are ascribed and avowed to through relationships.

To view identity as a social process is to acknowledge that identity is an interactional accomplishment. It is embedded in our conceptions of ourselves, our actions, our relationships, and our social affiliations, and it is produced, refashioned, and continually negotiated through interaction and social performances.

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Activity 3

A. The idea that identity is performed is similar to sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of self as performance (articulated in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* published in 1959) — i.e. that in their interactions with others individuals are performing or acting out a role and a version of themselves, and are engaged in a process of impression management. Read Adam Barnhart's short commentary on Goffman's theory at http://www.dinicola.it/sit/Erving%20Goffman%20The%20Presentation%20of%20Self%20in%20Everyday%20Life.htm

B. The concept of performance of identity or self applies not only to situations where you are literally onstage performing a role or presenting something to an audience but to all communication situations. Think of a social interaction or communication situation that you have been involved in recently (e.g. a conversation with a person in authority, a letter you wrote to someone) and analyze the process of identity performance and impression management that you were engaged in using the questions below.

1. What identity were you "performing" and how or in what sense were you "performing" that identity in that context? What impression of yourself were you trying to create in the mind of the other person?
2. Do you think you were successful in managing the other person's impression of you? Based on your experience, what are the challenges in impression management?
3. Does the idea of performance of self or identity mean one is being inauthentic, deceitful, and a phoney? Explain.

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Hecht states that the four frames of identity interpenetrate or are intertwined with each other. They are not separate from each other but fused. Jung and Hecht cite the example of gender identity. We may identify ourselves as man or woman (*personal frame*) and our enactment of

our gender identification is determined by how others look at men in relation to women or women in relation to men (*relational frame*), and by how the dominant cultural scripts and power structures define men and women (*communal frame*). In other words, communal identities help reinforce personal identities and affect the enacted and relational identities.

The notion of the interpenetration of frames can explain how identities are usually consistent and complementary. However, inconsistency and contradiction among the frames can occur. For example, there may be a mismatch between a person's self-concept and others' ascriptions that he/she experiences in his/her relationships. The resolution of these contradictions involves constant negotiation, accounting for the dynamic and fluid nature of identity.

Jung & Hecht propose the concept of **identity gap** to refer to discrepancies between or among the four frames of identity, and their study focuses in particular on the gap between personal and ascribed relational identities and the gap between personal and enacted identities. They emphasize that since CTI posits that "identity is inherently communicative and social", then these gaps or discrepancies "should be associated with communication outcomes" (p. 270). Accordingly, in their study they examined the relationships between the two identity gaps and three key communication outcomes, namely, communication satisfaction, feeling understood, and conversational appropriateness and effectiveness, and they found that larger gaps are associated with less communication satisfaction, appropriateness and effectiveness and less feelings of being understood. In another study (Jung, Hecht & Wadsworth, 2007), they hypothesized that identity gaps "are more likely to occur among international students, who often lack mainstream American communication skills and are subject to stereotypical and/or ignorant attributions, in their communication with Americans" (p. 608).

3.0 Collective Identities

According to Hecht & Choi (2012), "From social identity theory, CTI draws on the notion that identity is based on social categorization and shared group memberships (e.g., Turner, 1991). Societal norms and practices are internalized in the form of social identities based on social categories (especially in/outgroup distinctions)" (p. 138). They add that —

> CTI conceptualizes identity as a collective or group quality. As a form of social construction, there is a "shared" element to identity. Just as members in certain groups recognize or share a particular language, beliefs, norms, and culture, they also share common images of "selfhood" or identity that transcend individual group members and are reflected in cultural products and myths.

These collective identities include racial and ethnic identity, national identity, religious identity, and organizational identity.

Martin & Nakayama (2010) characterize ethnic identity as "a set of ideas about one's own ethnic group membership. It typically includes several dimensions: (1) self-identification, (2) knowledge about the ethnic culture (traditions, customs, values, and behaviors), and (3) feelings about belonging to a particular ethnic group. Ethnic identity often involves a shared sense of origin and history, which may link ethnic groups to distant cultures in Asia, Europe, Latin America, or other locations" (p.185).

National identity, according to Wodak et al. (1999), "is constructed and conveyed in discourse, predominantly in narratives of national culture" (p. 22). Based on Benedict Anderson's famous definition of nations as "imagined communities," Wodak et al. posit that national identity is socially constructed and "[c]onceived in language, rather than blood".

Activity 4

Watch/Listen to Siyanda Mohutsiwa's TED talk on "How young Africans found a voice on Twitter" (available at https://www.ted.com/talks/ siyanda_mohutsiwa_how_young_africans_found_a_voice_on_twitter) and reflect on the role of social media in the construction of racial and regional identities.

For some people, being identified with a particular religion is a significant aspect of their identity. Moreover, religious identity is often linked to racial or ethnic identity. This shows that categories of identity can overlap (e.g. Jewish identity). A related concept here is the concept of **intersectionality**, which refers to "how race, class, gender, sexuality, the body, and nation, among other vectors of difference, come together simultaneously to produce social identities and experiences in the social world, from privilege to oppression" (Yep, 2015, p. 86).

Indeed, the production of collective identities such as racial and ethnic identity, national identity, and religious identity is shaped by power dynamics in society. One aspect of this is evident in stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination (e.g. ethnocentricism, racism, and sexism) against particular social and cultural groups and communities. But another aspect has to do with the (re)construction of cultural identity through language, using narratives or stories, by marginalized groups. The notion of **positioning** may be relevant in understanding this process of social identity construction evident in identity politics.

Activity 5

Read Elena Andreouli's "Identity, Positioning and Self-Other Relations" (available online at http://psr.iscte-iul.pt/index.php/PSR/article/view/391/349, as well as in the COMM 10 course site) and answer the study questions below.

1. What is positioning? How does it clarify the relational character of identity?

2. How does positioning explain how marginalized groups negotiate and assert their collective identities in asymmetric social relations where they experience discrimination and prejudice?

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Citing various theorists, Andreouli notes that the process of identity construction involves a dynamic between the individual and the social, or between the self and other (similar to the notion, in CTI, that identity is relational), which produces social representations. These "provide various possible identities" or positions that individuals take to "help them structure their social world and orient themselves within this world" (Andreouli, 2010, pp. 14.2-14.3). Individuals and groups construct social identities that reflect their efforts to situate or position themselves within their society and "in relation to the symbolic field of culture" (p. 14.2).

Positioning theory posits that this process of positioning and social identity construction is discursive and can be understood as "'doing identities' in talk". Yamakawa et al. (2009, p. 2) explains this as follows:

> Positioning is defined as "the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines" (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 37). One can be positioned by another or by oneself, interactive or reflective positioning, respectively. This definition means that participants position themselves or are positioned in different conversational locations according to changes in storylines.

Since "conversations are on-going discursive practices in which storylines and participants' roles are subject to change as conversations evolve", positions are not fixed or stable. Participants can position themselves in certain ways, reframe the conversation, and change the storyline. This process is evident in the reconstruction of collective identities by marginalized groups.

Summative Assessment

In this activity, you will locate examples of the social construction of Filipino national identity in the form of memes on Facebook or Twitter, and analyze these using the concepts from CTI and the perspectives on social representation and positioning discussed in this module.

You teacher may decide to structure this as a group activity culminating in group presentations to the rest of the class, as follows:

1. As a group, select five memes on social media that have to do with being Filipino or Filipino nationalism or nationhood.
2. Analyze the process of personal and collective identity construction that is evident in the deployment of these memes on social media. For example, how do the memes exemplify identity performance and positioning?
3. Prepare a 5-10 minute presentation of your group analysis.

Conclusion

In this module, we have explored the dynamics between identity and communication as elucidated in the communication theory of identity and positioning theory. A key point made is that identities are multiple and not singular, and they do not function in total isolation from each other. When we acknowledge the multiplicity of identities, we can avoid drawing hasty generalizations about people (stereotypes) that may fuel discrimination, micro-aggressions, and inter-group conflict. Instead, our judgements of people are based on a balanced and wide understanding of our respective contexts and positionalities. Secondly, if identities are relational phenomenon, we would do well to refrain from oversimplifying them as revolving around a unitary axis of similarity and difference. As Joseph (2010) opined, identity is an intersubjective construction emerging from overlapping and complementary relationships characterized by, but not exclusive to, similarity and difference, genuineness and artifice, and

authority and deligitimacy. This perspective in turn should enable us to give space for others to negotiate their identities as we negotiate ours.

Required Readings

(listed in the order in which they should be read in this module)

Hecht, ML. (2009). Communication theory of identity. In SW Littlejohn & KA Foss (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Communication Theory*, pp. 139-141. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Jung, E & Hecht, ML. (2004). Elaborating the communication theory of identity: Identity gaps and communication outcomes. *Communication Quarterly*, *52*, 265-283.

Andreouli, E. (2010). Identity, positioning and self-other relations. *Papers on Social Representations, 19,* 14.1-14.13.

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