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Identities and Perceptions

We don't know you, and you don't know us. From reading this book you might have some impressions of us. You know who *you* are, though—not just name and address but the kind of person you are. You have an **identity**, and we don't just mean an ID that you show people to prove your age. You are an individual who is friends with other individuals, each perhaps quirky with a unique personality and identity. You might see these individuals and yourself as persons with a history deep inside, a childhood set of experiences that made them who they are and you who you are. You know things about yourself that no one else knows. You are you, you-nique!

This chapter will teach you that you have multiple identities and that these identities are transacted through communication. Some are created by the situation in which you find yourself or in the company of certain people but not others. (Do you really behave the same way with your mother as you do with your best friend?) Others are the result of cultural symbols attached to “being gay or lesbian” or “being a go-getter or a team player.” Some are performed for an audience. In intimate relationships, you can perform and express most of your true self. In a police interview, you may want to conceal some of what you are. In a hospice at the end of your life, you may want to hang onto a little *dignity*. You lose control over the skills, performances, and parts of your body and self that used to compose your identity, and you become physically more dependent on others. Those old folks who look a lot older than you now could be how you will be someday. Think about it.

Identity is partly a *characteristic* (something that you possess), partly a *performance* (something that you do), and partly a *construction of society*. For example, society tells you how to be “masculine” and “feminine” and indicates that “guys can't say that to guys” (Burleson, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2005). This restricts the way in which men can give one another emotional support. Society also provides you with ways to describe a personality;

Focus Questions



1. Some textbooks picture a person's identity like an onion, built layer by layer and communicated slowly as intimacy increases. Does this really make any sense?
2. How do daily interactions with other people form or sustain your identity?
3. How much of your "self" is a performance of social roles where you have to act out "who I am" for other people?
4. What is meant by a symbolic self, and why do we have to account to other people for who we are?
5. What is the role of culture in your identity experiences?

the media focus you on some traits more than others. Categories like *gluttonous*, *sexy*, *short*, *slim*, *paranoid*, and *kind* are all available to you, but they are not all equally valued.

The ways you express yourself and the ways you respond to other people in your social context *transact* part of your identity. Your identity is partly constructed through your interactions with other people. Have you had the experience of being with someone who makes you nervous when you normally aren't nervous or who helps you relax when you feel tense? In these instances, your identity is molded by the person, situation, or communication. You'll get used to a rather odd phrase in communication studies: "*doing* an identity," used instead of "*having* an identity." Communication scholars now pay close attention to the ways in which people's behavior carries out, enacts, transacts, or *does* an identity in talk with other people.

The transaction of identities is guided in part through perceptions of yourself, others, and various components of an interaction. In other words, your internal views of yourself and others influence the external construction of identities. This notion may be somewhat difficult to comprehend, and we discuss this matter in more detail later in the chapter.

Up front, though, this is a very significant consideration and sets the discipline of communication and this textbook apart from others. Identities, relationships, cultural membership, and the like are not located within people or embedded within their minds waiting to be discovered. These things are instead created symbolically through interactions with others. At the same time, how a person views the world, organizes what is seen, and evaluates this information will influence the symbolic activity that does take place, and ultimately how that symbolic activity is viewed, organized, and evaluated. It is therefore important that these activities are also taken into account when exploring the transaction of identities.

Who Are You?

Bob is a really nice guy. He is a good friend, loyal, trusting, open, honest, comforting, seriously devoted to his kids, caring, charitable, active in his religious community

organizing charitable events (especially for mentally challenged kids), giving, respectful, a fabulous cook (he specializes in the cuisines of other cultures), and very caring to his aging parents (he never misses a visit and takes them on a short trip each weekend even though his father does not remember any longer who he is and his mother is seriously arthritic). Bob is the kind of guy who would give you one of his kidneys if he matched and you needed it. Everyone in the neighborhood knows and loves Bob; at some time or another everyone in Baxter Close has experienced his stellar generosity, whether the single-parent family that found groceries on their doorstep the week they ran out of food stamps or the feisty senior lesbian who just lost her lifetime partner and needed someone to talk to. He is active in the PTA, does long Saturdays coaching and refereeing the blossoming mixed-sex soccer group that he started, and does a spectacular comedic turn as George W the Orangutan.

At work Bob is the most hated SOB in the Border Security branch of Homeland Security. There is no one who is such a completely ruthless, nasty, dogged, suspicious, awkward cuss. He is an officious, pettifogging a-hole, and there is no one better at interrogation. He nails people who make illegal applications for a green card and has the highest record in the whole border area for catching cheats. People lie to him, and he gets them every time (he read Chapter 3); people fudge, and he owns them; people say things that do not match up with what they wrote on their forms, and he gets it right away without even looking. Nobody gets past Bob. He asks all the right probing questions, uncovers the half truth and the full-out lie, trusts no one, and never accepts at face value anything on an application form (he even caught the fact that one person could not spell his own name the same way in two different places on the same form). He regularly has grown men breaking down in tears in his office. If you get interviewed for immigration by Bob and are not 100% straight up, then he will get you. Believe it.

We all know a version of Bob. We all know a supervisor who is a pain in the butter-milk plant where he rules without mercy, gives no one any breaks, and cuts no slack, but in the rest of his life he is a beacon: a leading member of his church community, a giving and generous community member, and a social delight as long as there is no one there from the workplace.

Other examples surround us everywhere in everyday life. The same person may be unfriendly and distant on one occasion but funny and sociable on another. You may know someone whom you consider to be kind, yet one of your friends sees the person as nasty. In both cases you're talking about the same person, but people can have mood swings as a result of periodic hormonal imbalances, drinking too much, gluten intolerance, or just having had a series of really unfortunate events happen to them on a bad hair day.

Dr. Harold "Fred" Shipman was a respected family practitioner in England, working in two practices in the 1980s and 1990s and even appearing on TV in a discussion about the way to treat mentally ill patients. He was a quiet but well-respected pillar of the community. He was also England's most prolific mass murderer and in January 2000 was convicted of murdering 15 patients. Subsequent inquiries revealed that he was directly responsible for the murders of at least 215 people, and that figure is probably a serious underestimate.

College Experience



Consider the situation of nontraditional students and identities, which may apply to you personally or to other students in your classes.

Nontraditional students have the same concerns as all students such as getting their work done on time and receiving good grades at the end of the semester or term. However, they view themselves differently. Nontraditional students frequently return to school after working for a number of years, perhaps the result of deciding their line of work was not satisfying or the result of losing their job in a rough economy. Many of these students have been quite successful, and yet they are very apprehensive about entering the classroom. Such students are used to being obeyed, someone to whom people turn for advice, a leader, a mentor, and an example. Which is the *real* person: the successful professional and authoritative leader or the obviously older student in a classroom where previous experience counts for very little?

Now consider the situation of traditional students, which again may apply to you personally or to other students in your classes. These students most likely experienced some success in high school. Many entering students graduated with honors, participated in many activities, received a number of awards and distinctions, were well known in their school, and were looked upon with admiration by others. Now, these students may view themselves as isolated in a sea of people who were equally or even more successful in high school. Which is the *real* person: the standout high school student who excelled at everything or the awkward first-year student seeking some sort of recognition?

Return to these questions once you have read the entire chapter and see if your perspective has changed.

That is perhaps not terribly surprising since many changes in mood are temporary, relatively unimportant, and reversible. Get the hormones back into balance, let them sleep off the hangover, and let the sun shine in, and then they will be back to their same old self.

What is much more complicated for communication scholars is the question of why different people disagree about whether someone is *essentially* good or bad. Why might two professors argue about whether a particular student is (a) intelligent or (b) someone who stands no chance of improving? Why might the bosses in an organization argue about whether someone should be promoted or passed over? If every person had just one identity at the core of his or her multi-layered onion of personality, then these kinds of questions would make no sense.

If people had a stable core inside a set of layers we could peel away to reach “the truth,” then we would never be able to change our mind about someone. If someone were a good and loyal friend, he would never turn into an enemy unless he had a personality transplant. Yet you’ve most likely had the experience of seeing someone in a different light over time. This is a real problem for scholars of communication thinking about the nature of identity and self and why some people do not include “self” in their courses: far too mushy.

When a stranger does something unkind, your first thought may be to blame personality: This is an evil person, perhaps with psychopathic tendencies. Or you could put it down to the identity that had been constructed during childhood when there were some bad experiences. Lawyers often explain their clients’ bad behavior in such terms. On the other hand, the “unkind stranger” probably saw identity in personality terms, too, but more favorable ones—as a good decent person who was being irritated by an

annoying stranger (you!) and walked away thinking, “What a jerk [or some other non-specific and dehumanizing term]!”

Of course, *you* (and your friends) have never done anything that dehumanizes, stereotypes, or depersonalizes others, have you? You have never called anyone “an illegal” or “a frat boy” or lumped someone together with all other “college kids” or chanted, “Oh, how I hate the team from State.”

Framing Identity

Earlier chapters talked about frames for situations and thinking. Shotter (1984) sees identity as a frame for interpreting other people’s actions: Your beliefs about other people set the stage for your understanding of how they act. Burke (1969) also saw motives and personality language as helpful frames for interpretation (see Chapter 2). In short, your identity will be revealed in a language that reflects the priorities of a particular culture or relationship and its frames for thinking about how humans should act and describe themselves.

Human beings talk about their identities in ways that are steered by social norms and conventions in their society. In return you expect other people to present such narratives and behaviors. Your culture frames identity as a stable inner self; it therefore feels quite normal for you to think in those terms, so you can easily understand the idea that someone would reveal a private self layer by layer. However, you would be thought crazy if you said, “My identity is blue with an elephant spirit inside.” You’d soon be locked up.

You have to use terms and phrases that your audiences recognize as symbolically meaningful in the culture: “I’m a go-getter but quite private, ambitious yet introverted.” In other words, you *frame* your talk about yourself and your identity in the language that your culture has taught you to use.

Perceiving Encounters and Transacting Identities

Your framing of an encounter is based, in part, on the perceptions you develop. **Perception** is a process of actively selecting, organizing, and evaluating information, activities, situations, people, and essentially all the things that make up your world. In what follows, we explore this process and its influence on identity construction.

Selecting

In Chapter 4, we discussed how receiving stimuli does not necessarily mean you will recognize their presence or direct your attention to them. Imagine going up to a friend whose concentration is focused on a book (or a newspaper, a television program, a computer screen, a ball game, or any number of objects or activities). You greet her by saying hello or by saying her name, but she does not seem to recognize you are speaking. This person continues to focus solely on the book. You speak again, a little louder this time, and still receive no response. You may have to tap her on the shoulder, hit her over the head, or practically scream to get her attention away from that book. You are not being ignored; this person is simply not attending to, or selecting, the sound of your voice.

You select and focus more on some things going on around you and less on other things. Certain factors influence exactly to what extent you focus. If something stands

In Chapter 10, we discuss how you are more likely to select and attend to particular media that support your beliefs, attitudes, and values using the principle of selective exposure.

out for whatever reason, you are more likely to focus your attention on that. For instance, if you scan a room of people wearing similar clothing, you will likely focus on a person whose clothing is dissimilar to that of the others. Another factor influencing focus is *selective exposure*, which means you are more likely to focus on and expose yourself to that which supports your beliefs, values, and attitudes.

During your interactions with others, you will be more likely to pick up on activities that support your views of the world and pay less attention to those that do not. If you view yourself as a competent person, you will be more likely to pick up on the behaviors of others that uphold this view such as compliments and less likely to focus on behaviors that counter this view such as criticism. The opposite, of course, would happen if you viewed yourself as an incompetent person.

Organizing and Evaluating

Observations of the world are not floating randomly around in your head. Instead, they are organized in ways that allow you to retrieve them when necessary, and new information is connected to previous information that is already organized and stored. **Schemata** are mental structures that are used to organize information in part by clustering or linking associated material. For example, information about relationships can be stored and connected in “relationship” schemata and drawn from when needed. Since this information is stored in a relatively accessible manner, it can be used to make sense of what you are experiencing and to anticipate what might happen in a given situation.

This particular approach is based on the work of George Kelly (1955), who saw people as scientists making hypotheses about everyday life and then testing their effectiveness. When researchers conduct experiments, they make calculated guesses about what will happen and then decide if what they anticipated actually occurred once the experiment has been completed. Kelly maintained that people do the same thing in their everyday lives. For instance, upon meeting you may greet someone in a particular way because—based on past experience and observations—you believe doing so will lead to approval from the other person and a proper relational connection. If your expectations are proved *correct*, your existing way of viewing the world will be strengthened, and you will be more likely to perform the same action in the future. If your expectations are proved *incorrect*, you will likely revise your way of viewing the world, and you will be less likely to perform the same action in the future.

Your organizational system is constantly being updated and modified based on new experiences and as a result of evaluating its accuracy and usefulness. This system seems pretty efficient and beneficial. However, it is not without its disadvantages. Kelly (1955) maintained that a person’s processes are “channelized” by the ways in which events are anticipated. As a result, certain ways of acting and viewing the world become more deeply ingrained in your thinking. Imagine running the end of a stick in a straight line over and over in the same spot on the ground. Eventually, an indentation begins to develop and

becomes deeper and deeper as you continue to run the end of that stick in the same place. The same thing can be imagined with certain ways of behaving and viewing the world. The more you behave in a certain way and the more often you view the world in the same way, the deeper and more ingrained it becomes in your thinking. After a while, it becomes difficult to imagine behaving in another way or viewing the world in a different way.

Consequently, Kelly (1955) urged people to imagine a table as being soft. When touching a table, you probably anticipate that it will be hard, and most of the time you will be correct. However, you should always consider the possibility that the table will be soft. Always consider the opposite, and always consider other possibilities. When done consistently, a person's behaviors and views frequently become seen as correct and natural rather than things that should be constantly evaluated and reassessed. Alternatives may or may not be better, but they should always be considered.

Kelly's (1955) work has resulted in a better understanding of the ways in which people think and relate to others. It can also be used to better understand how our perceptions influence the transaction of identities through prototypes, personal constructs, and scripts.

Prototypes

A **prototype** is the best-case example of something (Fehr, 1993). You may have a prototype of an ideal romantic partner, for instance. This prototype could be a composite of different people or an actual person. Accordingly, your romantic partner prototype could be compiled from characteristics of past romantic partners, or it could be a single romantic partner. It could be made up of people you actually know, people you have observed, and media representations. All prototypes are influenced culturally.

When identities are transacted they are broadly measured using prototypes as standards. Someone attempting to construct the identity of a romantic partner would use his or her prototype as a model, and other people would use their respective prototypes of a romantic partner in order to evaluate and make sense of this person.

Personal Constructs

Personal constructs are bipolar dimensions used to measure and evaluate things. Whereas prototypes tend to be broad categories, personal constructs are narrow and more specific characteristics. These personal constructs can be used in the development of a prototype and to determine how close someone may come to meeting all the criteria. Using romantic partners again as an example, the following personal constructs could be used:

Attractive–Unattractive

Kind–Mean

Passive–Aggressive

Intelligent–Ignorant

Humorous–Dull

Employed–Unemployed

Like prototypes, personal constructs are used to make sense of the world and to evaluate what is taking place. Personal constructs, though, are more specific and detailed. They can be used to determine just how well a person measures up according to certain categories.

Scripts

Scripts are guides for behavior developed from our system of knowledge. A movie or television script informs actors what they should be doing and saying. Such scripts assist actors in performing a character. Likewise, you use scripts when performing social roles and enacting identities in everyday life. For example, you know what to say and how to act when performing the role or identity of a student. You are following the script of a student. Using the running example of romantic partners, you know what you should do and say as a romantic partner through scripts developed from personal experience and observations of others. You know when the other “actors” are following a script correctly and performing an identity accurately. You also know when they have forgotten their lines and are giving a horrible performance.

While following scripts is important, most actors are required to improvise their performance from time to time. They also explore the creation of a character by saying different things and behaving in different ways. You must do the same thing when you are performing particular identities. You develop your own spin on an identity. Furthermore, you must improvise and edit scripts when scenes or contexts change.

Listen in on Your Life



How would you describe yourself? Would you give your national identity, ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual identity, age identity, social class identity, religious identity, or anything else?

Now check the categories that you can use to personalize your profile on Facebook or another social networking site. People are generally asked to identify themselves by association with particular categories and such items as favorite videos and music, hobbies, and sexual orientation. Are these the categories you would use to describe yourself to a child, an employer, or a new neighbor? How would you feel if your instructor composed a slide show of all the Facebook profiles of the people in your class and showed it to everyone?

Scripts are subject to change and revision through experience and assessment. Sometimes a person discovers the table is soft! Beyond careful evaluation, however, scripts change with the passing of time. This change is especially noticeable with scripts involving identities associated with close personal relationships. For instance, the script of a friend in elementary school is different from the script of a friend in high school. Both scripts are different from the script of a middle-aged friend. Returning yet again to the example of romantic partners, the script of a romantic partner early in the relationship will likely be different from the script of a romantic partner after a number of years in the same relationship.

Ultimately, scripts focus our attention on the mutual influence of perception and the transaction of identities. Identities are performed through interactions with others, and perceptions guide our understanding of what should be done and the

evaluation of symbolic performance. In what follows, we examine how people may view themselves as having an established inner core or identities to be revealed, but in actuality identities are performed through communication and personal relationships.

Identity as Inner Core: The Self-Concept

We start with the “commonsense” idea that you have a true inner self. By the end of the chapter, however, we will show that there is more to learn about personal identity built by relationships with other people. The chapter connects identity to language; to other people; to the norms, rules, and categories in society/culture; and to narratives of origin and belonging to other relationships. This identity may be represented by such statements as “I’m an African American” or, on a bumper sticker, “Proud parent of an Honor Roll student at City High.” These examples make statements of identity that claim it through relationships with other people or membership in groups, not just as a person with an inner core.

Psychic/Reflective Self

When you think about persons as having some true personal, private, and essential core, covered with layers of secrecy, privacy, and convention, this is known as a **self-concept**. Because everyone is assumed to have this core, you are alarmed by people who have multiple personalities or are bipolar. Someone should have only one consistent personality; people who have more parts are disturbed or irrational. Your identity may be hard for other people to reach, but according to many self-help books and celebrity biographies, it is reachable. Communication serves to help people *talk about* or *express* what is inside, perhaps in greater depth as they get to know one another better. Communication scholars can teach you the skill of expressing yourself well or help you be open and honest and let “the real you” be heard.

The Weirdness of Consistent Expectations

A consistent inner self would be made up of the person’s broad habits of thought (e.g., someone is kind, outward-looking, introverted, or self-centered). You might see that self revealed communicatively in styles of behavior (e.g., someone is aggressive, calm, ambitious, reliable, hardworking, or manipulative) or in characteristic styles of perception (e.g., someone is paranoid, trusting, insightful, or obstinate). *Personality* is the label that you would first use to describe someone’s *identity* if you were asked about it casually in a conversation by someone who wanted to know what that person was like.



Photo 5.1 How do daily interactions with other people form or sustain your identity? What is being communicated here about gender, identity, and culture? (See page 129.)

But it's a very odd idea indeed. People are too complex. A person can *simultaneously* be many identities. For example, a person can simultaneously be a loving parent, a vegetarian, a conservative, quick-tempered, a good dancer, a bad cook, business savvy, and a team player. You also have a choice in the identity you describe: a relational identity (friend/parent), an interactional identity (worker/customer/server), a sex or gender identity (male/female/masculine/feminine/GLBT), a racial/ethnic identity (the boxes to check on government forms), or a behavioral identity (extrovert/introvert). It's a choice, then, to describe your identity.

Unstable Behaviors

Another key point about identity comes from everyday experience. People are multi-layered and can have different moods, being good company on one day and bad on another. People can fluctuate during the course of the day, and events may happen to them that cause them to act "out of character." These fluctuations help demonstrate that it's a peculiar idea that somebody could have a *fixed* inner identity if it can also be so variable and complex over time.

The best you can hope for, then, is that the more you get to know someone through talk, the more you can understand the person's usual self. You can learn about what triggers a tailspin or a rant.

The upshot, though (and we are sorry to spoil it for you), is that all the magazine articles that offer to tell you about "the real [Lady Gaga/Beyoncé/Ashton Kutcher/

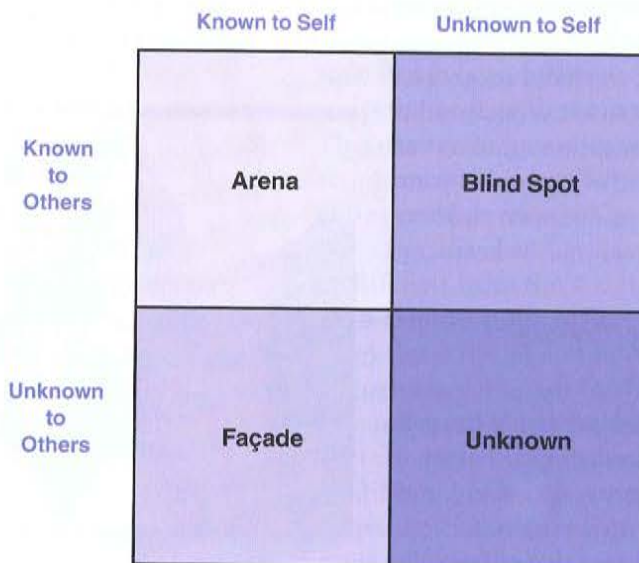


Figure 5.1 The Johari Window

Source: From "The Johari Window: A Graphic Model of Interpersonal Awareness," by J. Luft and H. Ingham, 1955, in *Proceedings of the Western Training Laboratory in Group Development* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles).

Joseph Stalin/Sarah Palin]” are always going to be nonsense. The notion that someone has a real single inner core is suspect for communication scholars from the get-go. Also, if identities could not be changed or reviewed, there would be no therapists or communication textbooks with advice on how to develop your communication and presentation skills (i.e., how to present your “true self” more effectively).

The Johari window, developed in 1955 by two guys called Joe (Luft) and Harry (Ingham)—and we’re not kidding—distinguishes between what a person knows about self and what others know about the person. As you can see in Figure 5.1, people have *blind spots*: Everyone but the person in question can see something obvious (for example, that Bob is “a pain”). In other cases we pretend (*façade*), concealing from people something that we know about ourselves (guilty secrets and so forth). The *arena* is basically where we openly act out a public identity that everyone else knows and recognizes.

Describing a Self

Ask people to tell you who they are. They will tell you their name and start revealing information about themselves, usually with a narrative that places their self in various contexts. *Steve Duck* indicates to someone in your culture that the person is male and has to put up with many very unoriginal jokes about his name. Although he has lived in the United States of America for more than 25 years, he is a Brit, or English as he prefers to think of it. His family comes from Whitby in North Yorkshire, England, where the first recorded Duck (John Duck) lived in 1288. John Duck and Steve Duck share the same skeptical attitude toward authority figures. John is in the historical record because he sued the Abbot of Whitby over ownership of a piece of land. John was descended from the Vikings who sacked and then colonized Whitby in about 800 A.D. *Duck* is a Viking nickname—based surname for a hunchback. (Have you ever ducked out of the way of anything? If so, you have crouched like a hunchback.)

Steve Duck is also relatively short for a man, is bald but bearded, likes watching people but is quite shy, and can read Latin, which is how he found out about John Duck while researching his family tree. Steve likes the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams, enjoys doing cryptic crosswords, knows about half the words that Shakespeare knew, and has occasionally lied. He resents his mother’s controlling behavior, was an Oxford college rowing coxswain (cox’n), loves reading Roman history, and is gluten intolerant. He thinks he is a good driver and is proud of his dad, who was a Quaker pacifist (that antiauthority thing again) who won three medals for bravery in World War II for driving an unarmed ambulance into the front line of a war zone in order to rescue two seriously wounded (armed) comrades. Steve has lived in Iowa for 26 years. He has had two marriages and four children, carries a Swiss Army knife (and as many other gadgets as will fit onto one leather belt), and always wears two watches. He is wondering whether to get the new Swiss Army knife that has a data storage capacity, a laser pointer, and a fingerprint password. Sweet.

Self-Description and Stereotypes

Notice that some of this information about Steve’s identity is *self-description*. That is, these words describe him in much the same way that anyone else could without knowing him personally (e.g., male, bearded, short, bald, two watches, magnetic sex appeal).

Self-description usually involves information about self that is obvious in *public* (or on your résumé). If you wear your college T-shirt, talk with a French accent, or are short, this evidence about you is available even to strangers who can see your physical appearance or hear how you sound.

“Identity” in this sense is communicated publicly and physically. It parks the individual in categories (national, racial, or ethnic groups) or else lumps him or her into stereotypes. It isn’t really an individual identity but is more about group membership.

Case in Point



Analyze recent interaction with people you would consider a friend, an acquaintance, and a stranger. What, if any,

disclosure took place? What does this tell you about disclosure and relationships?

In the above example, these are the points that describe particular feelings and emotions that other people would not know unless Steve specifically disclosed them. The *resents*, *is proud of*, *enjoys*, *thinks*, and *is wondering* parts give you a view of his identity that you could not directly obtain any other way, though you might work it out from what Steve says or does.

These parts, since they are spoken as insights, are self-disclosure, not self-description. The term *self-disclosure* is limited to revelation of private, sensitive, and confidential information relevant to identity. Values, fears, secrets, assessments, evaluations, and preferences all count as such confidences that you share with only a few people.

Self-Disclosure

Some points in Steve’s description of himself count as **self-disclosure**: the revelation of information that people could not know unless Steve *made* it known. In

The Importance of Being Open

Jourard (1964, 1971) wrote about self-disclosure as making your identity “transparent” to others. People who make the most disclosures are acting in the most psychologically healthy manner. Early research also connected self-disclosure with growth in intimacy. Classic reports (e.g., Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993) found that the more people become intimate, the more they disclose to each other information that is both broad and deep. Also, the more you get to know someone’s inner knowledge structures, the closer you feel to him or her.

Closeness generally develops only if the information is revealed in a way that indicates it is privileged information that other people do not know. For example, if a man lets you (and only you) know the secret that he has a serious invisible illness (such as diabetes, lupus, or prostate cancer), an unusually strong fear of spiders, or a significantly distressed marriage, you feel valued and trusted, because he let you into his inner life.

Openness and Closeness

There is an important relational process going on here: When someone tells you about inner identity, you feel honored and valued by someone’s revelation of the inner self, or you may actually not care for what you are hearing. The important point is that

disclosure itself does not make a difference to a relationship; the relationship makes a difference to the value of disclosure. If you feel the relationship is enhanced by self-disclosure, it is. If you don't, no matter how intimate the disclosure, the relationship does not grow in intimacy.

Later research has refined this idea (Dindia, 2000; Petronio, 2002). For example, too much disclosure of identity is not necessarily a good thing at all times. You've probably been bored by somebody telling you more than you wanted to know—TMI! By contrast, people who are closed and don't tell anything about themselves are regarded as psychologically *unhealthy*.

Communication scholar Kathryn Dindia (2000) points out that the revelation of identity is rarely a simple progression and is certainly not just the declaration of facts and then—*bam!*—intimacy. Self-disclosure is a dynamic process tied to other social processes that relate to your identity and how you disclose yourself over time. It continues through the life of relationships and is not a single onetime choice about whether to disclose or not. Part of your identity is the skill with which you reveal or conceal information about yourself and your feelings, as any good poker player knows.

Dynamics of Revelation

In fact, the revelation of your identity, like identity itself, is an open-ended process that continues indefinitely in relationships even after they have become deeply intimate. It is dynamic, continuous, and circular so that it is hard to say where self-disclosure or identity begins or ends. It is also influenced by the behavior and communication of the other person(s)—the audience. Both self-disclosure and identity occur in the context of a relationship that has ups and downs.

Dialectic Tensions

Everyone places a limit on the amount of information that he or she reveals to others, and some choose to remain private, even in intimate relationships. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) identify a push-pull **dialectic tension** of relationships. These tensions occur whenever you are in two minds about something or feel a simultaneous pull in two directions. Some communication scholars (e.g., Baxter, 2004, 2011; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008) suggest that there simply is no singular core of identity but a dialogue

Make Your Case



Consider the following example: José learns more about Juanita's identity when she discloses something about herself that makes

him feel positive about their relationship. It also makes him nervous because, in the past, he did something that her disclosure shows she would not like. So he tells her what he did and how sorry he is about it. Juanita likes the fact that he confides in her and feels better about the relationship as a result. She wonders if José is still the same person he was when he did the bad thing or if he is genuinely sorry and has changed.

Using this example, make the case that identity, self-disclosure, and relationships are mutually connected *transactions*, not just simply the peeling away of layers.



Photo 5.2 How do you explain the fact that a person can experience different sides of self and hold different views simultaneously? (See page 129.)

where people feel social pressure to be open yet also want to retain control over private information. This tension leads to people sometimes giving out and sometimes holding back information about themselves. Even in the same relationship, a person can feel willing to reveal information sometimes but crowded and guarded at other times. A personal relationship is not a consistent or a simple experience any more than identity is. Each affects the other over time. Also you may tell different versions of your identity to different audiences on different occasions.

between different “voices” in your head. For example, in relationships, you want to feel connected to someone else, but you do not want to give up all of your independence. You can see how you—and your identity—can grow by being in a relationship, but you can also see that this comes at a simultaneous cost or threat to your identity, independence, and autonomy.

The autonomy–connectedness dialectic is one dialectic tension, but another is openness–closedness,

Identity and Its Boundaries

In fact, people in relationships negotiate boundaries of privacy (Petronio, 2002). Part of the difference between friendship and mere acquaintance is that you have stronger boundaries around your identity for acquaintances than you do for friends.

As Jon Hess (2000) notes, you simply don’t like some people. You don’t want them to know “personal stuff” and may actively limit what they find out. Caughlin and Afifi (2004) have shown that even intimate partners sometimes prefer to completely avoid topics that may annoy or provoke the other person.

Petronio (2002) deals with the inconsistencies in the revelation of information by pointing to the importance of boundary management of the topics within different relational settings. People experience a tension between a desire for privacy and a demand for openness differently in different relationships. Couples make up their own rules for controlling the boundaries of privacy. So, for example, two people may define, between themselves, the nature of topics that they will mention in front of other people and what they will keep to themselves. A married couple may decide what topics it can discuss in front of the children, for instance, and these topics may change as the children grow older. In other words, people show, employ, and work within different parts of their identity with different audiences at different times.

Self-Disclosure and Boundaries: Who Am I, for Whom?

One of Petronio’s (2002) key points is that the suitability of something for disclosure is itself affected by relational context and by agreement between the partners. There are no absolutes.

She also draws attention to the ways in which a couple can decide how much to disclose. Amount, type, or subject of self-disclosure can be a topic for discussion (often called *metacommunication* or communication about communication). In contrast to Jourard's (1964, 1971) idea that there are absolute rules about self-disclosure of identity, Petronio (2002) demonstrates that it is a matter of personal preference, worked out explicitly between the partners in a relationship through communication.

The upshot of this discussion of self-disclosure questions identity as a straightforward, layered possession of your own inner being. Your self-disclosure and your identity are jointly owned by you and a partner. There is more to identity than just *having* or *revealing* one, then. The norms of appropriateness for reciprocity, the rules about amount of revealed information (especially negative information) show that there is a social context for communication about identity. Identity is revealed within that set of social rules, cultural norms, and contexts.

Self-disclosure reacts to a **norm of reciprocity** (an unspoken rule about fairness and giving back about as much as you receive). If you say something self-disclosing to someone, that person should tell you something about himself or herself in return. If one person keeps telling information but gets nothing back, the person will stop doing it. Oddly enough, the norm of reciprocity can actually be used to interrogate people or find out information about them indirectly. If you say something personal about yourself, that loads an obligation on the other people to respond by saying something equally personal about themselves.

Identity and Other People

Saying that there is a social context for identity is basically making two points:

1. Society as a whole broadly influences the way you think about identity in the first place.
2. The other people who meet a person may influence the way that person's identity is expressed.

When you reveal your identity, you often use stories to tell the audience something about yourself and help its members shape their sense of who you are. As with self-disclosure, so too with stories: They are influenced by both society/culture and the specific persons or audience to which you do the telling.

Narrative Self and Altercasting

People tell stories about themselves and other people all the time and pay special care to what they will say, particularly for occasions like job interviews, sales pitches, and strategic communication of all sorts. You may have noticed that you adapt stories of your identity for consumption by other people in a social context (see Chapter 2).

Stories We Tell

A report about your identity characterizes you by means of a memory or history in its narrative or a typical or an amusing instance that involves character (your identity), plot, motives, scenes, and other actors (see Chapter 2). Even when you reveal an internal model of self, this story organizes your identity in ways other people understand in terms of the rules that govern accounts, narratives, and other social reports. As Kellas (2008) has pointed out, narratives can be an *ontology* (how I came to be who I am), an *epistemology* (how I think about the world), an *individual construction*, or a *relational process*, such as when romantic partners tell the story about how they first met.

Origin Stories

Reports about an identity have a narrative structure that builds off both the sense of origin derived from early life and a sense of continuity. The self comes from somewhere and has roots—"I'm Hispanic," "I'm a true Southerner," "I'm a genuine Irish McMahan."

Identity comes in part from narratives of origin. These can be personal, cultural, or species ("What was my great-grandfather like?" "Where did I come from?" "Where did our culture come from?" "How did humans get started?"). A sense of origin leads, for most people, straight back to their family, the first little society that they ever experienced (Huisman, 2008). The specific context of family experience is the first influence on a person's sense of origin and identity. It gives the person a sense of connection to a larger network of others. Indeed, in African American cultures, "the family" can be seen as a whole *community* that goes beyond the direct blood ties that define "family" in other cultures. The earliest memories give you a sense of origin as represented by your experiences in a family-like environment.

Origin, Memory, and the Telling of Your Self

However, early memories are not neutral facts. They are loaded, like dice, by the experiences you think you had in your family. A childhood seen as terrible can make you absorb an identity that gives you low self-esteem, for example (Duck, 2011), and could lead you to treat later relational opportunities with great caution. People treated respectfully by parents end up confident and secure about themselves, whereas those treated by their parents as nuisances come to see themselves that way. They also become anxious in relationships or avoid them altogether.

Table 5.1 Early Experiences and Influences on Your Later Life

Early experiences affect your thought worlds/worlds of meaning.

They influence your sense of identity.

They create identity narratives about you and your history.

They influence feelings about self, the goals that you set for life, the levels of ability you feel you have, the ways you relate to other people, the dark fears that you hoard all your life, your beliefs about the way to behave properly (religious beliefs, rituals about birthdays, who cares for people emotionally, whether sports "matter"), and whether you see life as peacefully cozy or violently conflicted.

A key point, then, is that by both direct and indirect means, your interactions and communication with other people shape your views of yourself. This happens even when you don't realize it or necessarily want it to happen—and this influence is not automatically something you just grow out of. Therapists get paid to put clients' childhood into better perspective! Early experiences in “the family” lay down many of the tracks upon which your later life will run.

Stories about you must fit with what your audience believes to be coherent and acceptable. It is not just that you *have* a self but that you shape the *telling* of your identity in a way that your audience (culture, friends) will accept.

This distinction is like the difference between the words in a joke and the way someone tells it: The telling adds something performative to the words, and a person can spoil a joke by telling it badly. Likewise with identity, it has to be performed or told in appropriate ways. When Bob, the nontraditional student, the Purdue fan, or the frat boy brags about his achievements to friends, he probably tells his identity differently than he would to former workmates, the police, Indiana University fans, or the dean of students.

Labeling

Identity is also made by **labeling** the characteristics that you want to stand out. One of our faculty colleagues refers to himself as “Dr. Dave,” which creates a certain kind of image, a mixture of professionalism and accessibility that is also an amusing cross-reference to the cultural icon Dr. Phil. Such nicknames and labels can be used for reinforcement of a type of identity. In the case of *other people*, a technical term used in discussion of communication and identity is **altercasting**. Altercasting refers to how language can give people an identity and then force them to live up to the description, whether positive or negative (Marwell & Schmitt, 1967). For example, you are altercasting when you say, “As a good friend, you will want to help me here” or “Only a fool would . . .” These label the listener as a certain kind of person (or not), by positioning the person to respond appropriately (as a friend or not as a fool). Even such small elements of communication transact your identity and the identities of those people around you.

When you communicate about yourself, therefore, you assume that the audience will understand you, so you assume a shared basis for understanding other people. On top of that, you assume that special people—friends, for example—not only understand your “self” but also do reality checks for you. When people talk about identity, then, they assume their audience will be able to comprehend, interpret, and probably support it.

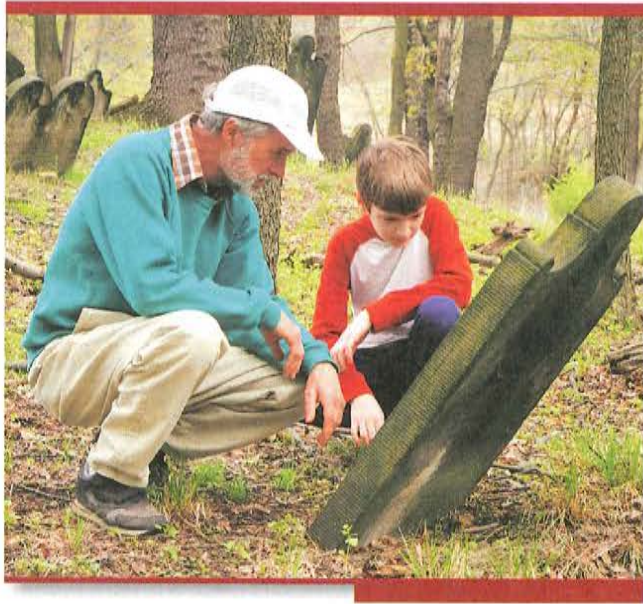


Photo 5.3 How is your sense of identity represented by connections to the past? (See page 129.)

The earlier description of Steve, for example, mentions a Swiss Army knife because that particular item is well known in the culture. Any description of an identity is therefore steered by beliefs about the criteria, categories, and descriptions that will matter to, or even impress, the audience. For example, people project a professional identity by wearing smart business clothes to a job interview. People also communicate their cultural identity through their accent and behavior. Thus “who you are” is a *relational* point.

Symbolic Identity

Your sense of self is influenced by language frames, culture, origin, membership, and other people’s thoughts about you. But don’t you actually *do* a lot of your identity for specific people, such as your priest, your neighbor, your best friend, and your coworkers and customers?

The Many Yous

Most people have a range of identities that they can turn on as necessary according to where they are and who is there with them. In that case, identity is not so much something that you *have* as it is something that you *do* in ways that people recognize as suitable.

Do you ever feel like a different person when you are with your friends compared to when you’re talking to your mother? Are you the same person all the time, or do you have good and bad days? Do you ever do things you regret or regard as not typical? Ever say things you regret?

Most people have protested that someone has misrepresented them. Until now you would not have called that resistance to an altercasting by refusing to accept it, but that is what it is. A hostile or negative person can make you feel very bad about yourself. Have you ever met anyone who didn’t really “get” what you are about?

On the other hand, you may have had a close relationship with a partner that felt good because you were able to be your *true self* around the other person or because the person helped bring out sides of you that other people could not. Did you struggle to assert an identity independent from your parents when you were a teenager?

You must already be wondering how any of that is possible if “you” are one identity. You may also have started to think about how advertising, religion, and social fashions influence the ways you dress and act. Other people can affect your values, the choices you make, and how these feed into your sense of identity. Your culture and your identity at

the very least interact with one another. At most, culture and its icons (pop stars, fashion models, celebrities) account for quite a lot of your identity, by showing you how to dress and how to behave and what standards of belief are “OK.”

Contrarian Challenge



If you do not have a central core that is “you,” then how come people who know you well can apparently

predict what you will do and know how you should be dealt with?

Symbolic Self

The lesson is simple: Your identity is shaped by culture and the people you interact with. This is because you can

reflect that your “self” is an object of other people’s perceptions and that they can do critical thinking or listening about you as well. In short, your identity is a **symbolic self**, a self that exists for other people and goes beyond what it means to you; it arises from social interaction with other people. As a result, you fit identity descriptions into the form of narratives that your society and your particular acquaintances know about and accept. Hence, any identity that you offer to other people is based on the fact that you all share meanings about what is important in defining a person’s identity.

Symbols and Identity: Reflection

Another way of thinking about identity, then, is in terms of how broad social forces affect or even transact an individual’s view of who he or she is. This set of ideas is referred to as **symbolic interactionism**. In particular, George Herbert Mead (1934) suggested that people get their sense of self from other people and from being aware that others observe, judge, and evaluate one’s behavior. How many times have you done or not done something because of how you would look to your friends if you did it? Has your family ever said, “What will the neighbors think?”

Mead (1934) called this phenomenon the human ability to adopt an **attitude of reflection**. You think about how you look in other people’s eyes or reflect on the fact that other people can see you as a social object from their point of view. Guided by these reflections, you do not always do what you want to do but what you think people will accept. You may end up doing something you don’t want to do because you cannot think how to say no to another person in a reasonable way. You cannot just stamp your foot and shout “SHAN’T!”

Your identity, then, is not yours alone. Indeed, Mead (1934) also saw self as a transacted result of communicating with other people: You learn how to be an individual by recognizing the way that people treat you. You come to see your identity through the eyes of other people, for whom you are a meaningful object. People recognize you and treat you differently from everyone else, as distinct in their eyes and so in your own.

Self as Others Treat You

Relationships connect through communication to the formation of your identity. If other people treat you with respect, you come to see yourself as respected, and self-respect becomes part of your identity. If your parents treated you like a child even after you had grown older, they drew out from you some sense that you were still a child, which may have caused you to feel resentment. If you are intelligent and people treat you as interesting, you may come to see yourself as having different value to other people than does someone

Physically attractive people often act confidently because they are aware of the fact that other people find them attractive. On the other hand, unattractive people have learned that they cannot rely on their looks to make a good impression. They need other ways of impressing other people (e.g., by developing a great sense of humor; Berscheid & Reis, 1998). In a phrase, you come to see yourself as others see you.

who is not treated as intelligent. You get so used to the idea that it gets inside your “identity” and becomes part of who you are, but it originated from other people, not from you.

If you are tall, tough, and muscular (not short, bald, and carrying a Swiss Army knife), perhaps people habitually treat you with respect and caution. Over time, you get used to the idea, and identity is enacted and transacted in communication as a person who expects respect and a little caution from other people (Duck, 2011). Eventually, you will not have to act in a generally intimidating way in order to make people respectful. Your manner of communicating comes to reflect expected reactions to you. Although your identity began in the way you were treated by other people, it eventually becomes transacted in communication.

Society as Other Individuals: Society's Secret Agents

Another way of thinking about this is to see how “society” gets your friends to do its work for it. You have never met a society or a culture, and you never will. You will only ever meet people who (re)present some of a society's key values to you. This contact with other folks puts them in the role of *Society's Secret Agents*. These people you meet and talk with are doing your society's work by enacting ways that culture represents the values that are desirable within it.

When you communicate with other people in your culture, you get information about what works and what doesn't, what is acceptable and what isn't, and how

much you count in that society—what your identity is “worth.” For example, the dominant culture in the United States typically values ambition, good looks, hard work, demonstration of material success, and a strong code of individuality. People stress those values in their talk (“The American Dream”/“Winners”) or else feel inadequate because they don't stack up against these values (“Losers”).

Of course, you are forced to interact with some people whether you like them or not (coworkers, professors, or relatives, for example). The principle is the same even though you most often think of the influence



Photo 5.4 What is meant by a symbolic self, and why do we have to account to other people for who we are? (See page 129.)

of your friends and relatives or key teachers on your identity. Nonfriends may challenge aspects of your sense of identity and make you reflect on the question, “Who am I?” Sometimes this reflection results in reinforced confidence in your opinions, but

sometimes it undermines, modifies, or even challenges them. Either way, discussions of everyday communication transact some effect on your view of self, your identity. Your sense of self/identity comes from interactions with other people representing society as a whole.

Individuals acquire their individuality through the social practices in which they carry out their lives. Accordingly, they encounter powerful forces of society that are enacted by Society's Secret Agents in ordinary interactions. That "raised eyebrow" from your neighbor/instructor/team fan was actually society at work! Your "self" is structured and enacted in relation to those people who have power over you in formal ways, like the police, but most often you encounter the institutions within a society through its secret agents: public opinion. The people you know who express opinions about moral issues of the day and give you their judgments—they are Society's Secret Agents, guiding what other people do and thinking just as they do. And for that matter, your talk with other people makes you an agent also. Every time you comment on someone else's behavior, dress, relationships, or speech, you (yes, you) are helping to enforce social norms and practices.

Transacting a Self in Interactions With Others

In keeping with this book's theme, you can't have a self without also having relationships with other people—both the personal relationships you choose and the social relationships you reject. A person cannot have a concept of self without reflection on identity via the views of other people with whom he or she has relationships. Your identity is *transacted* or constituted in part from two things: First, you take into yourself the beliefs and prevailing norms of the society in which you live. Second, you are *held to account* for the identity that you project. As a football fan, you lose face if you don't know the score during a game or cannot name your own team's quarterback. As a student, you are expected to know answers about the book you are reading for your class.

Banality of Life as an Identity Maker

Again, your identity is a complex result not only of your own thinking, history, and experience but also of your interaction with other people and their influence on you, both as individuals and as Society's Secret Agents. Behind all those things that you think of as abstract social structures, like "the law," are real individuals acting in relation to one another (you and the police officer). These social relations get internalized into yourself. You slow down at speed-limit signs not because you want to but because you saw the police car and don't need another ticket.

Strategic Communication



People develop impressions of others through social networking profiles. Consider what your

profile says about you. Does your profile convey the identity or identities you desire? If not, what might be changed to help construct the desired identities? If your profile is working, how can it be enhanced?

The routine ordinary banality of everyday life talk with friends who share the same values and talk about them day by day (a) actually does something for society and (b) helps make you who you are. Daily routines like meeting at 11 A.M. for coffee in the coffee room put events in a predictable framework of meaning through trivial and pedestrian communication (Wood & Duck, 2006). But—here's the point of this section, so remember it well—you *do* your identity in front of the audiences, and they might evaluate and comment on whether you're doing it right.

The same kinds of processes occur in interaction when you profess your undying allegiance to one football team and your supposed hatred of the opposing team, or say that murder is wrong or that bankers are gouging customers. The people around you do not resent it but actually encourage you and reinforce your expression of ideas that make up your identity. They share it and support it. Just as Bob and his colleagues dehumanize “illegals” as targets for his most diligent attention and scrutiny—and his colleagues admire him for it—so do you when you categorize the opposing team as some kind of enemy. The underlying idea—that a group of people can be treated as nothing more than depersonalized, dehumanized others with no appreciable individuality—runs through team loyalty and rivalry, town versus college kids, treating older students as aliens, and any other kind of stereotyping.

Performative Self

Other people influence who you are and how you are treated. Other people use labels and judge your behavior. You are not just an inner core but part of a heritage. You are not just you; you are a symbol in a cultural and social structure.

On top of that, add the curious idea that you don't just *have* an identity; you actually *do* one. Identity is not just *having* a symbolic sense of self but *doing* it in the presence of other people and doing it well in their eyes. This is an extremely interesting and provocative fact about communication: Everyone *does* his or her identity for an audience, like an actor in a play. **Performative self** means that selves are creative performances based on the social demands and norms of a given situation. As we will now discuss, you try

to present the right face to people you are with and do your identity differently in front and back regions.

Mock put-downs are a common form of intimate banter in English-speaking countries but not in Eastern cultures. This suggests that face is culturally influenced on top of everything else that influences it. For instance, direct challenges to a person's competence (“You are a failure!”) are openly offensive. Friends, though, may have a running joke between them that allows them to say it to one another.

Facework Revisited

Facework is part of what happens in everyday life communication (Chapter 2), and people have a sense of their own dignity. This gets transacted in everyday communication by polite protection of the person's “face.”

This idea is about the performance of one's identity in public, the presentation of the self to people in a way that is intended to make the self look good.

Erving Goffman (1959) indicated the way in which momentary social forces affect identity portrayal. Goffman was interested in how identity is performed in everyday life so that people manage their image to make everyone “look good” (Cupach & Metts, 1994). The concept of “looking good” of course means “looking good *to other people*.” It is therefore essentially a relational concept. (Table 5.2 provides challenges to a person’s face.)

Table 5.2 Embarrassments and Predicaments

Embarrassment is when you perform a behavior that is inconsistent with the identity you want to present (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Metts, 2000). Someone who wants to impress an interviewer but instead spills coffee on his or her lap undercuts “face” of professional competence by being clumsy. Someone who wants to present a “face” of calmness and confidence but who suddenly blushes or twitches allows nonverbal behavior to contradict the identity of being cool and composed. The *performance* of an identity (face) is undercut by a specific behavior that does not fit.

Predicaments present a longer challenge to the performative self (think of predicaments as extended embarrassment). If you go to a job interview and your very first answer makes you look stupid, you still have to carry on, with the interviewers all thinking you are a hopeless, worthless, and unemployable idiot. You cannot leave; you have to sit it out watching their polite smiles and feeling terrible.

It takes you one step closer to looking at the interpersonal interaction that occurs on the ground every day. Rather than looking at society in an abstract way, Goffman (1959) focused on what you actually *do* in interactions. In part, your portrayal of yourself is shaped by the social needs at the time, the social situation, the social frame, and the circumstances surrounding your performance. Remember the server from Chapter 1? She does not introduce herself that way to her *friends* (“Hi, I’m Alice, and I’ll be your server tonight”) except as a joke, so her performance of the server identity is restricted to those times and places where it is appropriate.

Front and Back Regions

Goffman (1959) differentiated a **front region** and **back region** to social performance: The front region/front stage is *not a place* but *an occasion* where your professional, proper self is performed. For example, a server is all smiles and civility in the front stage of the restaurant when talking to customers. This behavior might be different from how he or she performs in the back region/backstage (say, the restaurant kitchen) when talking with the cooks or other servers and making jokes about the customers or about being disrespectful to them. But again, the back region is not just a place: If all servers are standing around in the restaurant before the customers come in and they are just chatting informally among themselves, the instant the first customer comes through the door, their demeanor will change to “professional” and they will switch to a front-region performance.

That means the performance of your identity is not sprung into action by your own free wishes but by social cues that this is the time to perform your “self” in that way. An

identity is a performance. It shows how a person makes sense of the world not just alone but within a context provided by others.

Any identity connects to other identities. You can be friendly when you are with your friends, but you are expected to be professional when on the job and to do student identity when in class. So is this what allows Bob to be “two people,” one at work and one in the social community? Is he just doing a front-region SOB performance at work?

Individuals inevitably draw on knowledge shared in any community, so any person draws on information that is both personal and communal. If you change from thinking of identity as about “self as character” and instead see it as “self as performer,” you also must consider the importance of changes in performance to suit different audiences and transactive situations.

Self Constituted/Transacted in Everyday Practices

We have seen that identity is not just a personal inner core but a communicative performance molded by surrounding cultural influences, the way that you *do* your identity and how you are recognized as having one. Your practical performance of “being yourself” is affected by the social norms that are in place to guide communication in a given society. People judge your identity performance in a practical world and expect you to explain or account for yourself.

Practical Self

Your identity is performed in a material world that affects who you are. For example, the fact that you can communicate with other people more or less instantaneously across huge distances by mobile telephone materially affects your sense of connection to other people. This practical self is born from the ability to do practical things and is illustrated by the importance to many young people of learning to drive a car. When you can drive, not only do you go through the transformation of self as “more of a grown-up,” but when you have a car you also can do what you cannot do when you do not have one. The ability to drive and obtain access to a car expands your identity in a practical way.

Part of your *performance* of self is connected to the practical artifacts, accompaniments, and “stuff” that you use in your performance. If you have the right “stuff” (professional suit, bling, or a sports car), the self that you project is different from the self you perform without it.

Accountable Self

An important element of doing an identity in front of an audience is that you become an **accountable self**, which essentially allows your identity to be morally judged by other people. What you do can be assessed by other people as right or wrong according to existing habits of society. Any performance of identity turns identity into a moral action. That is, identity becomes a way of living, based on choices made about actions that a person sees as available or relevant. Others will

judge and hold the performance to account. The social construction of identity is influenced by societal value systems. Society as a whole encourages you to take certain actions (do not park next to fire hydrants, protect the elderly and the weak, be a good neighbor, recycle!).

Moral accountability is a fancy way of saying that society as a whole makes judgments about your actions and choices. It holds you to account for the actions and choices that you make, but it also forcefully encourages you to act in particular ways and to see specific types of identity as “good” (patriot is good, traitor is bad; loyalty is good, thief is bad; open self-disclosure is good, passive aggression is bad, for example). As noted before, “society” does this through everyday performances and communications by Society’s Secret Agents—including you.



Improvisational Performance

The identity that you thought of as your own personality, then, is not made up of your own desires and impulses but is formed, performed, and expressed within a set of social patterns and judgments. These are reinforced by the practices in a community through the relationships that people have with one another. The Indiana University fan is not asked why she is cheering for Indiana University by other Indiana University fans; Bob is not asked by his colleagues why he is so tough on “illegals.”

A person’s identity is a complex and compound concept that is partly based on history, memory, experiences, and interpretations by the individual, partly evoked by momentary aspects of talk (its context, the people you are with, your stage in life, your goals at the time), and partly a social creation directed by other people, society and its categories, and your relationship objectives in those contexts. Your performance of the self is guided by your relationships with other people, as well as your social goals. Even your embodiment of this knowledge or your sense of self is shaped by your social practices with other people. Your self-consciousness in their presence influences the presentation of yourself to other people. Although a sense of self/identity is experienced in your practical interactions with other people, you get trapped by language into reporting it abstractly as some sort of disembodied “identity,” a *symbolic* representation of the routine practices and communication styles that you experience in your daily interactions with other people. Once again, then, another apparently simple idea (identity, personality, self) runs into the relational influences that make the basics of communication so valuable to study.

Photo 5.5 What can you say about a transgender person who has had reassignment surgery? What problems might a transgender person encounter in relation to identity as discussed in this chapter? (See page 129.)

Table 5.3 summarizes what you've learned in this chapter about identity and relationships.

Table 5.3 Some Ways to See Identity Communication and Relationships

Psychic/ reflective self	<i>Habits of thought/of behavior/of perception identify a person's "personality."</i> What you normally think of as identity a priori: Your communicative behavior just expresses the inner self.
Symbolic self	<i>Broad social forces affect self differentiation/characterization.</i> Self arises out of social interaction and not vice versa; hence, it does not "belong to me." You are who you are because of the people you hang out with, interact with, and communicate with; you can be a different identity in different circumstances.
Performative self	<i>Present social situation affects self-portrayal.</i> Selves are acted out in a network of social demands and norms; you do your identity differently in front and back regions and try to present the right "face" to the people you are with.
Practical self	<i>Material world affects self/how you think of self.</i> Practical aspects of materiality transform the concept of self. Your identity is represented by objects that symbolically make claims about the sort of person you are.
Accountable self	<i>Social context influences broad forms of portrayal.</i> Personality is just an abstract concept. People act within a set of social ideas and habitual styles of thinking, allowing other people to comment and steer how they behave.
Improvisational performance	<i>There is a rhetorical spin to this and how "self" is presented.</i> Ideology affects the manner of presentation of terms, characteristics, and so on. We try to narrate ourselves in the way that our society expects us to represent identity.

FOCUS QUESTIONS REVISITED

1. Some textbooks picture a person's identity like an onion, built layer by layer and communicated slowly as intimacy increases. Does this really make any sense?

For some reasons and purposes, it makes sense for us to see identity this way, but it really is not the only way that "identity" actually works in the everyday encounters of relationship life.

2. How do daily interactions with other people form or sustain your identity?

In at least two ways: Their responses to us affect the way we feel about ourselves; also, they act as Society's Secret Agents by innocently enforcing society's norms and beliefs through their comments on our own styles of behavior and identity performance.

3. How much of your "self" is a performance of social roles where you have to act out "who I am" for other people?

Much of what you do in everyday life is steered by your awareness of yourself as a social object for other people. Hence, you perform roles and styles of behavior that

are appropriate in the circumstances. Your “inner self” may be constrained by this awareness.

4. What is meant by a symbolic self, and why do we have to account to other people for who we are?

Your “self” is presented to other people as a symbol, and you have to describe yourself in terms and phrases that your audiences recognize as symbolically meaningful in the culture. You are also able to take an attitude of reflection that recognizes that you are an object of other people’s perceptions and judgment. You will remember from Chapter 1 that people can observe your behavior and “go beyond” it to its symbolic meaning.

5. What is the role of culture in your identity experiences?

Culture has multiple roles in identity experience. For one, cultures regard “individuality” differently; for another, your origin from a particular culture steers the way you think about people and their styles of behavior; for still another thing, your culture is part of your identity, and people proudly claim their cultural heritage as part of “who they are.”

KEY CONCEPTS

accountable self	124	perception	105
altercasting	117	performative self	122
attitude of reflection	119	personal constructs	107
back region	123	prototype	107
dialectic tension	113	schemata	106
front region	123	scripts	108
identity	101	self-concept	109
labeling	117	self-disclosure	112
moral accountability	125	symbolic interactionism	119
norm of reciprocity	115	symbolic self	119

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR FRIENDS

- Discuss with your friends or classmates the most embarrassing moment that you feel comfortable talking about, and try to find out what about the experience threatened your identity. What identity were you projecting at the time, and what went wrong with the performance?
- Have your friends look at how advertisers sell the *image* of particular cars in terms of what they will make the owner look like to other people; the advertisers recognize that identity is tied up in material possessions. Discuss with your friends the following topics: How is your identity affected by your preferences in music, the Web, fashion magazines, resources, or wealth?

- Get a group of friends together and ask them each to write down what sort of vegetable, fish, dessert, book, piece of furniture, style of music, meal, car, game, or building best represents their identity. Read the responses out loud and have everyone guess which person is described.

MEDIA LINKS

- Watch the movie *Sideways* (Payne, 2004) and fast-forward to the veranda scene during which Miles talks to Maya about his preference for wine and it becomes apparent that he is using wine as a metaphor about himself. He projects his identity through his knowledge about the subtleties of wines. Basically he uses it to describe himself, and his hope is that Maya will learn to understand him.

Maya: You know, can I ask you a personal question, Miles?

Miles: Sure.

Maya: Why are you so into Pinot?

Miles: [laughs softly]

Maya: I mean, it's like a thing with you.

Miles: [continues laughing softly] Uh, I don't know, I don't know. Um, it's a hard grape to grow, as you know. Right? It's, uh, it's thin-skinned, temperamental, ripens early. It's, you know, it's not a survivor like Cabernet, which can just grow anywhere and, uh, thrive even when it's neglected. No, Pinot needs constant care and attention. You know? And in fact it can only grow in these really specific, little, tucked away corners of the world. And, and only the most patient and nurturing of growers can do it, really. Only somebody who really takes the time to understand Pinot's potential can then coax it into its fullest expression. Then, I mean, oh its flavors, they're just the most haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle and . . . ancient on the planet.

- Collect examples that demonstrate how media representations of ideal selves (especially demands on women to be a particular kind of shape, but try to be more imaginative than just these images) are constantly thrown in our path.
- How do television talk shows encourage us to be open, honest, and real? Do these programs teach us anything about the "right" ways to be ourselves?

ETHICAL ISSUES

- If your identity is partly constructed by other people, how does this play out in relation to diversity, cultural sensitivity, and political correctness versus speaking the truth?

- Analyze the difficulties for someone “coming out” in terms of performance, social expectations, norms, and relationships with those around the person.
- If you have a guilty secret and are getting into a deep romantic relationship with someone, should you tell him or her early on or later? Or should you not tell him or her at all?

ANSWERS TO PHOTO CAPTIONS

Photo 5.1 ■ There are messages about identity both “inside” the picture and “outside” it: The performance of femininity and womanhood is being communicated to the girl, a sense of the importance of looks and the enhancement of natural appearance in private. The picture also communicates to outsiders the role of personal hygiene in personal identity.

Photo 5.2 ■ Baxter (2011) points out that people have different dialogues available to them at each moment to draw them one way or another. Dialectical tensions are a constant part of daily life, and you may often feel pulled in two directions at once, whether in expressing what you feel or in enacting your identity.

Photo 5.3 ■ Interactions and experiences with older people give us a sense of our own identity and where we came from. This boy is learning how to connect himself to the past of his family.

Photo 5.4 ■ Symbolic self means that your identities represent something to other people and not just yourself. Furthermore, identities are transacted symbolically through your interactions with others. Many of the roles that you enact in everyday life are drawn from cultural expectations about the kind of person you “should” be. Part of your identity is therefore always an act. Identity can be “performed,” and the performance takes over the identity. We all know who the impersonator is *trying* to be, but . . . he’s not that person. We actually just saw the real guy working at a truck stop in Omaha and going by the name *Barry*!

Photo 5.5 ■ Sometimes physical self needs to be aligned with inner self through sex reassignment surgery. The transgender person still has to perform (dress, behave) in a way that convinces others that the correct sex has now been assigned. Family members need to learn new labels for the person: Who was once a son is now a daughter; an aunt is now an uncle; a sister is now a brother (Norwood, 2010).

STUDENT STUDY SITE

Visit the study site at www.sagepub.com/boc2e for e-flashcards, practice quizzes, journal articles and additional study resources.

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