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IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND IDENTITY CHANGE: THEORIES AND COMPETENCE BUILDING

Identity researchers have shown that certain context changes lead to identity transformation: identity can shift due to marriage, career and family development, specific and intense life events, or living in a new country.

Identity negotiation theory refers to the processes through which people receive input from their environment in order to maintain their identities [12; 2]. Identities may change when people' *situated identities* (person's identity within a specific situation) clash with their *chronic identities* [12]. In new cultures, self-verifying feedback is scarcer and people's need to belong is stronger. Situated identities will emerge and contrast the chronic identities and their relation will be "negotiated" within the individual.

Within *Identity Control Theory* [4] identity is viewed as a set of self-relevant standards for a particular identity, a dynamic, self-regulating control system that operates when that identity is activated. Identity change may occur when people have multiple identities, related to each other, in the sense that they share meanings and are activated at the same time The changes depend the degree of commitment to the identity, the degree of salience of each of the identities and the degree to which each identity is tied to other identities in the full set of identities held by the individual.

People undergo important behavioral, cognitive and identity changes while living or traveling abroad. *Identity Change Model* [11] asserts that people successfully adapt to a host country by changing behaviors, thoughts, and even identity. These changes could make repatriation difficult.

Côté presented the concept of *identity capital*, or the idea that some people have the resources, time, and ability for identity change, while others do not. Identity capital involves two types of assets: (1) one involves education, social networks, and styles of dress and speech; (2) another is psychological, including self-efficacy, critical thinking abilities, cognitive flexibility, and self-monitoring [6].

Other author states that identity change is determined on one hand by *individual factors*, such as self-esteem, self-monitoring, openness to experience, and on the other hand by *cognitive abilities*. Contextual factors include cultural beliefs and expectations about identity, family communication processes which stimulate individuality, peers, school and work environments [7].

Theories explaining the motivation of identity change

Some theorists have argued that identity processes evolved to serve more general or *basic human needs*, including personal survival, avoiding uncertainty, suppressing fears about mortality, and maintaining social relationships. [15; 406] Vignoles considers that people in all societies have six identity motives: the *self esteem motive*, the *continuity motive*, the *distinctiveness motive*, the *meaning motive*, the *efficacy motive*, and the *belonging motive*). [15; 412]

1. Need for self-esteem and self-evaluation motives. The dominant view about identity and the self three decades ago was emphasizing the uniqueness, relative stability, and individuality of the self. *Social Identity Theory and Self-categorization Theory* go against the dominant view stating that personal identity is linked to a group and serves to build group identity and that sometimes salient self-images may be based primarily on our group memberships [14; 527]. Self-categorization theory emphasizes that people try to join groups they regard as positive and that compare favorably with relevant out-groups

Taylor and colleagues argued that self-evaluation is guided at different times by four motives: *self-enhancement* (aiming for positive current self-views), *self-assessment* (aiming for accurate self-views), *self-verification* (aiming for stable or consistent self-views), and s*elf improvement* (aiming for growth, or for positive *future* self-views) [13]. There is a debate related to the supremacy of self-enhancement/self-esteem on self-verification motive. Low self-esteem individuals pay more attention, or give more credence, to negative than to positive information when they evaluate themselves [12]. Thus, it seems that people will sometimes sacrifice potential gains in self-esteem in the interest of maintaining self-consistency.

2. Need for meaning refers to the finding of significance or purpose in one's existence. One possibility is that group identity processes are directed toward creating *meaningful identities*. In one study participants discriminated against another group only when in-group identity was portrayed as meaningless, suggesting that they were seeking to differentiate their group from the other group in order to construct meaningful group identities [10]. Many aspects of group processes and intergroup relations are driven by a need to reduce *subjective uncertainty* – which can be satisfied by constructing a meaningful identity. In particular, uncertainty motivates identification with those groups that provide a clearly defined meaning to the identities of their members [8].

3. Need for continuity refers to the need to feel a sense of connection between one's past, present, and future identities, make people accountable for their past and allow them to form future goals [5].The *essentialist* approach of continuity is based on the belief in some stable and enduring, essential "core" of identity; thus, continuity

is maintained by denying change. In the *narrativist* approach, the sense of continuity is based on establishing a coherent storyline in order to connect together different parts of one's life; major changes can be included into a coherent story using narrative devices such as "turning points" or through social procedures such as "rites of passage" .

4. *Need for distinctiveness* allow people to see themselves as distinguished in some way from others and in a group they can play complementary roles toward a common goal. Self -distinctive information is better remembered, frequently used in self description and considered as better self-defining. Vignoles states that distinctiveness may be constructed through *difference* (of abilities, opinions, personality, and appearance), *separateness* (distance from others, physical and symbolic boundaries, feelings of privacy, independence, and isolation), or *social position* (one's place within social relationships, including kinship ties, friendships, roles, and social status) [15; 416]. Another line of thinking is that social identity processes are driven mainly by interplay of motives for *distinctiveness* and for *belonging* [2]. *Optimal distinctiveness theory* proposes that the belonging need can be met through inclusion in groups, and the distinctiveness need through differentiating one's group from other groups. People increased identification with smaller (more distinctive) groups when their sense of distinctiveness had been threatened and with larger (more inclusive) groups when their sense of belonging had been threatened.

5. *Need to belong* refers to the need to maintain or enhance feelings of closeness to others, or social acceptance, both in interpersonal relationships and within groups [1; 497]. The need for belonging may be stronger in collectivist than in individualist cultures. Brewer and Yuki discuss the different meanings of social groups (social categorization, identification, loyalty, and trust) in North America they are based on perceived similarity and in Japan they are based on perceptions of the relational structure, interconnections, and differences among group members) [3].

6. *Need for efficacy* encompasses feelings of competence and control and it means to have a sense of self not just as an "object" but also as an "actor," capable of influencing one's environment [5]. However, there may be differences in what forms of competence are most salient or valued in different cultural contexts. Markus and Kitayama distinguished between "disjoint" (agency is located within the individual) and "conjoint" (agency arises from the coordinated efforts of multiple individuals) forms of agency. Disjoint may be more prevalent in individualistic cultures, whereas conjoint may be more prevalent in collectivist cultures [9].

Identity change awareness: application

This activity invites participants to explore the notions of identity and change, in time and in space, and to discuss whether and how change affects their own values and beliefs across cultures/contexts. They will develop awareness about the possible responses to change. *(Adults, 2 to 20 people, 50 minutes, use Handouts/photos, flipchart/board)*

Choose images that highlight the complexity and paradox of identity such as 'before and after' photographs, the restoration of a well known monument, images of

buildings before and after an earthquake, the new and the old model of a car (Volkswagen, Fiat). The goal is to choose examples that allow you to ask, "Is it still the same?" and elicit a good discussion.

If, for example, you chose the renovation of a monument, ask participants if it is the same monument? Write the answers on a board or flip chart. Consider three columns: first for synchronic change/identity (given point in time), second for a diachronic change/identity (across time), and third for statements that are factors of change. If participants give only one type of answers, you as mediator, try to provide answers from the other category as well. Analyze the answers in the three columns. There is no right or wrong answer.

Debriefing questions: What part of the activity was difficult? Did you feel uncomfortable at any point during the activity? What did you discover? How do you interpret it? What happens when people move into different cultural settings? What impact does that have on one's identity? What is a natural response to change? What are some lessons learned in this activity to be used in encounters with those who are culturally different?

Key Insights

1. Moving across cultures leads to change: some changes appear on the surface, other changes may influence an individual's perception of his or her values and beliefs. Sometimes, the question of right/wrong in a foreign country as compared to one's country of origin may affect individuals to the point that they question their choices and even their own identity. Main question: "Who am I?"

2. Our response to change is often confusion or stress. Change occurs in time (synchronic) and across space (diachronic). During a visit abroad these aspects of change come together, causing frustration. Reflecting upon the factors of one's uneasiness may help in understanding not only the situation but its underlying factors. Their question: "How do I deal with stress?"

3. Change can result in culture shock when the individual encounters a culturally different Other. 4. Change can result in self-shock when the individual faces differences with and within the Self.

4. The issue of identity and change is not viewed as a paradox in all cultures. The Asian cultures identity means "maintaining the essence". The idea of the monument, its value and symbol, and its lines are the essence, and as such they are immutable. The participants should filter the different ideas through the lens of culture.

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