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Identities, Perceptions, and Communication

Did you know that you develop multiple identities throughout the day? Before making an appointment for a psychological evaluation, recognize that we are not talking about a medical disorder. Everyone constructs multiple identities as part of his or her everyday relational life. Consider the many relational roles a person establishes in everyday life. A person may at once be a friend, sibling, parent, and child. That same person may be a student, coworker, supervisor, or customer. Within these various roles, when interacting with different people and in different contexts, a person may be passive, strict,

Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Explain the basic assumptions of identity construction.
2. Explain the processes of perceptions.
3. Explain how identities are transacted through communication and performance.
4. Explain how identities are transacted through self-disclosure.
5. Explain how identities are transacted in connection with other people.

caring, detached, feminine, or masculine. That same person may end the day cheering for a sports team in a group of die-hard fans or taking part in an online discussion about a favorite web series. Each of these aspects of daily experience requires the development of a different identity.

Identities can be defined as symbolic creations based on the performance of personal roles, how people perceive themselves, and how people want to be viewed by others. Sorts of identities might include personal identities (kind, mean, hardworking, lazy, fan of musicals), relational identities (parent, child, friend, enemy), social identities (customer, employee, supervisor), and demographic identities (biological sex, race, sexual orientation, place of origin, age, socioeconomic status).

identities: symbolic creations based on the performance of personal roles, how people perceive themselves, and how people want to be viewed by others

The presence of identity work influences the communication that takes place during an interaction. Our relationships with others are also greatly influenced by identities. Accordingly, greater awareness, knowledge, and appreciation of identities will assist you as you develop communication and relational understanding and skills.

The notion of identities as symbolic creations may be new to you, especially since it is common to think of an identity as something within a person. In fact, people's actions are sometimes explained by saying, "That is just who they are." However, people do not possess a core, unchanging self that drives their behavior and is just waiting to be revealed to others. In fact, there is a great deal to unpack and explain when it comes to identities. Fortunately, we have an entire chapter to do it!

You may have very perceptively noticed that the word *perceive* is included in the chapter title and the definition of *identities*. The creation and maintenance of identities are guided partly through perceptions of oneself, other people, and situations. **Perception** involves how a person views the world, organizes what is perceived, interprets information, and evaluates information—all of which will influence symbolic activity. It is therefore important to include such material in discussions of identity.

perception: process of actively selecting, organizing, interpreting, and evaluating information, activities, situations, people, and essentially all the things that make up your world

In what follows, we will provide key ideas about identities. We will then turn our attention to perceptions, explore the creation and development of identities through communication, and finally examine how other people's activities influence identity creation.

Basic Assumptions of Identity Creation

We will begin by examining basic assumptions of identity creation. Doing so will assist in better understanding what you might find to be a novel way of thinking about identities. We will lead with a big misconception—that people have a core self.

Myth of the Core Self

First, people do not possess core, unchanging selves that influence actions and are waiting to be disclosed. Having said that, people develop and possess core values and beliefs, and we are certainly not arguing against religious or spiritual beliefs about personhood. Additionally, people's particular biological makeup and physical characteristics can influence the way they communicate with others and—probably more so—the way others communicate with them. Even with these characteristics, people construct multiple, sometimes contradictory, identities through communication with others.

A general idea does exist that people are who they are, however. As mentioned, when describing other people's actions, someone might say, "That is just who they are." And, more than one website clickbait ad promises to expose the real Lady Gaga, PewDiePie, or other celebrity. The truth is that a core self does not exist. Because of the common assumption that one does, though, we will spend some time challenging this idea in just a bit.

Different Moods

You may feel outgoing and confident some days and communicate with others accordingly. Other days, you may feel more reserved and insecure, and this is reflected in your communication with others. People can get in a lousy mood as a result of periodic hormonal imbalances, gluten intolerance, or just a series of really unfortunate events happening to them on a bad hair day. People can also get in a good mood after talking with a good friend, getting a good parking spot, or earning an A on their communication exam. If people had a core self, they would feel the same way, maintain the same mood, and communicate accordingly all the time. However, that is not the case.

Different Situations

A person may be unfriendly and distant at school but funny and sociable at work. This person may be more confident and comfortable at work than at school. Or this person may have yet to make friends at school with whom he or she can interact in a sociable manner. It is also possible that this person views his or her time at school as serious business, and he or she wants to remain focused. Whatever the case may be, the point is the same. People transact multiple identities given different situations and different areas of their lives.

Different Relationships

People also transact multiple identities given the many different relationships shared with others. You may act one way around your friends and an entirely different way around your relatives. Different relational identities are constructed based on the relationships being transacted. Once again, if people had an unchanging core self, there would be no change in communication and behavior around different people. However, this change takes place, occasionally in dramatic ways.

Different Evaluations

Sometimes people evaluate the same person in vastly different ways. For instance, you may know someone whom you view as kind, yet one of your friends sees the person as nasty. Or two professors may argue about whether a particular student is intelligent or stands no chance of improving. If every person had just one identity at the core of his or her personality and everyone perceived it identically, then these competing evaluations would make no sense. Yet such varying evaluations of people happen quite frequently.

Sometimes even a single person will evaluate another person in vastly different ways. If people really had a stable core inside a set of layers that we could peel away to reach "the

DIVERSE VOICES

COLLEGE FOR TRADITIONAL AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS



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Diversity can involve age and experience. Consider nontraditional students and identities. Nontraditional students have the same concerns as all students, such as getting their

work done on time and receiving good grades. However, they view themselves differently. Nontraditional students frequently return to school after working for several years. Perhaps they have decided that their line of work is not challenging enough, they recognize that their full potential is not being realized, or they have lost their job in a rough economy. Many of these students have already been successful outside of the classroom, yet they are very apprehensive about *entering* one. Such students are used to being obeyed—to being someone to whom people turn for advice: a leader, a mentor, an example.

Now consider traditional students. These students most likely experienced success in high school. Many

entering students graduated high school with honors, participated in many activities, received a number of awards and distinctions, were well known in their school, and were admired by others. Now, these students may view themselves as adrift in a sea of people who were more successful in their own high schools and are now classmates in college competing for grades.

Questions to Consider

1. 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?
2. Which is the *real* person: the standout high school student who excelled at everything or the awkward first-year college student seeking some sort of recognition?

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

truth,” then we would never be able to change our minds 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 have most likely had the experience of seeing someone in a different light over time.

Culture and Identities

A second basic idea is that cultural groups to which you belong provide you with ways to describe and evaluate identities. Labels for identities such as *gluttonous*, *sexy*, *paranoid*, *masculine*, and *feminine* are available for use. And cultural groups to which you belong inform you about the proper ways to perform identities. Societies and groups tell you how to be “masculine” and “feminine.” They indicate such things as “guys can’t say that to guys” (Burlison, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2005), restricting the way men can give one another emotional support and requiring specific strategies for displays of emotion—“manly tears exploded from my eyes, lets feel together brahs” (Underwood & Olson, 2019). Societies and groups also place more value on some identities than others. In some rural cultures, for instance, being “tough” is considered something toward which men should strive, whereas being “weak” is something that should be avoided (McMahan, 2011).

Identities and Relationships

Another basic idea to explore is that identities are created in the context of personal relationships. Identities and personal relationships are interconnected in various ways. First, some identities are based on relationships themselves—the identity of parent, child, friend, romantic partner, and so on.

Second, it is through personal relationships that identities are enacted. When people are performing personal identities of being kind, mean, tough, passive, or a fan of the Chicago Bears, they are generally not doing it in a darkened room. Rather, they are performing these identities when interacting with other people—with whom, more often than not, a personal relationship exists. Personal relationships are also where identities are tested—if you went through a rebellious stage in high school, it probably involved your friends and family (McMahan & Duck, forthcoming).

Third, we learn about cultural understandings and evaluations of identities mentioned previously through relationships. This is an idea we examine more closely in Chapter 5, on cultures. In cultural groups in which it is “unmanly” to cry, for instance, that is learned through interactions with friends, family, and so on. A young boy might be told directly by an older relative not to cry when doing so. Or, a young boy might witness another young boy being teased by a group of friends when crying on the playground. Our understanding and evaluation of identity develop through personal relationships.

Finally, certain identities might be considered more attractive than others when it comes to establishing and evaluating personal relationships. Someone might seek another person who generally seems outgoing or generally seems reserved. Personal and cultural preferences naturally play an important role in such a process (McMahan & Duck, forthcoming).

Performance of Identities

Lastly, people perform their identities with others. You may have noticed that prior to this point we actually already used the term *perform* when discussing identities. This idea means that rather than *having* an identity, people are *doing* an identity.

Consider the following question. If you happen to see an adult and a child together and determine the adult is the child’s parent, how did you conclude that to be the case? The answer is likely that the person was *acting* like a parent, doing certain things and communicating the way a parent would communicate.

When people perform identities associated with social roles, they are not being fake and not necessarily being dishonest—although one would hope the pilot getting ready to fly a plane is actually a pilot or the doctor getting ready to perform surgery is actually qualified! Rather, they are acting in ways that both society and they perceive to be associated with a certain identity.

Performing identities associated with particular roles may be easy to understand and accept. Other types of identity performance tend to be a bit more challenging to grasp, at least initially, but will be discussed further within this chapter. Take the example of masculinity and femininity mentioned earlier. People perform being masculine, and they perform being feminine. These performances are based on what a society or cultural group establishes as masculine and feminine. And, a given person sometimes performs in a masculine manner and sometimes performs in a feminine manner, depending on the situation and the people with whom an interaction is taking place.

Identities and Perceptions

Having introduced those foundational ideas about identities, we can now turn our attention to perceptions. Consider further the notion introduced earlier when discussing the myth of a core self that one person’s evaluation of another person changes over time. Could identity be a matter of *perception* rather than *fact*? When a stranger does something rude, your first thought may be to blame personality (“This is an evil person, perhaps with psychopathic tendencies”). Conversely, that “rude stranger” probably sees his or her identity in personality terms, too, but more favorable ones—as a decent person who is being irritated by an

annoying stranger (you!)—and may walk away thinking, “What a jerk!” Notice that these are representations, attributions, or claims based on perception and not on facts. These views are based on the way one person perceives and understands the evidence.

Perceptions influence the development of identities and all meaning making. Perceptions are based on relational and cultural understandings. And, they involve the process of actively selecting, organizing, and evaluating information, activities, situations, and people, and essentially naming and giving significance to all the things that make up your world. In what follows, we will examine how that takes place.

Selecting

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 reading *Communication in Everyday Life*. 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 tap her on the shoulder to get her attention or hit her gently over the head with your new copy of *Communication in Everyday Life*. You are not being ignored; this person simply does not attend to the sound of your voice. In short, she is attending to the world *selectively*.

Everyone selects and focuses more on some things than others. If something stands out for whatever reason, you are more likely to focus your attention on that. If you scan a room of people wearing similar clothing, you will likely focus on the one person whose clothing is dissimilar to that of the others.

A person’s motives or needs at a particular moment in time will also influence the selection process. If you have an important appointment later in the day, you will probably focus more on clocks than you might when you have nothing planned. If you are traveling and getting hungry, you might start noticing restaurants when you pass by.

Our beliefs, attitudes, and values also affect the selection process, as explained by the following: (a) selective exposure, (b) selective perception, and (c) selective retention.

Selective Exposure

One explanation for our selectivity is **selective exposure**, which means you are more likely to expose yourself to that which supports your beliefs, values, and attitudes. Accordingly, you are less likely to expose yourself to that which counters your beliefs, values, and attitudes (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). So, if you tend to be politically conservative, you are more likely to listen to Rush Limbaugh and more likely to avoid watching MSNBC. If you are politically liberal, you are more likely to do the opposite. Selective exposure also explains why people are more likely to spend time with individuals whose beliefs, values, and attitudes are similar to their own.

selective exposure: the idea that you are more likely to expose yourself to that which supports your beliefs, values, and attitudes

Selective Perception

Beyond exposing ourselves to some things and not others, we will also pick up on some parts of a message and not pick up on other parts. **Selective perception** means you are more likely to perceive and focus on things that support your beliefs, values, and attitudes. And, you are less likely to perceive and focus on things that do not support your beliefs, values, and attitudes. If you view yourself as a competent person, you will be more likely to pick up on compliments and less likely to focus on criticism. The opposite, of course, will happen if you view yourself as an incompetent person. Selective perception also explains why two different people might evaluate the same person in different ways. If you want to

selective perception: the idea that you are more likely to perceive and focus on things that support your beliefs, values, and attitudes

believe that someone is good, you will probably focus on that person's good qualities while ignoring the negative ones. And, the opposite holds true as well.

Selective Retention

selective retention: the idea that you are more likely to recall things that support your beliefs, values, and attitudes

Once something is experienced, we are also likely to remember some parts and not remember other parts. **Selective retention**, also referred to as *selective memory*, means you are more likely to recall things that support your beliefs, values, and attitudes. And, you are less likely to recall things that do not support your beliefs, values, and attitudes. Using the earlier examples, if you view yourself as a competent person, you will be more likely to remember receiving compliments and less likely to remember receiving criticism. The opposite holds true, once again, if you view yourself as an incompetent person. Likewise, if you want to believe someone is good, you will tend to remember the good things that the person does and tend to forget the negative things.

Organizing, Interpreting, and Evaluating

Your observations of the world are selectively chosen and then organized in ways that allow you to retrieve them when necessary. The ways in which things are organized will influence how they are interpreted and evaluated, which is why we examine these three areas together.

When new information is selected, it is connected to previous information that is already organized and stored as your own characteristic way of looking at the world (through your organizational goggles). Your organizational goggles are constantly being updated based on new experiences and evaluations of their meaning to you. This system seems efficient. However, it is not without its disadvantages.

George 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 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 as you continue to run the end of that stick in the same place. You create a rut, and the same thing can happen with 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.

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 we organize information through the following: (a) schemata, (b) prototypes, and (c) personal constructs.

Schemata

schemata: mental structures used to organize information partly by clustering or linking associated material

Schemata are mental structures used to organize information partly by clustering associated material. For example, information about relationships can be stored and connected in "relationship" schemata and drawn on when needed. This information is stored in a relatively accessible manner, so it can be used to make sense of what you are experiencing and to anticipate what might happen in a given situation.

Prototype

prototype: the best-case example of something

A **prototype** is the best-case example of something (Fehr, 1993). For instance, we may have a prototype of a romantic partner based on an actual person or a composite of different people. You use your prototype of *romantic partner* or anything else as a guidepost for measuring other people. Of course, no one is likely to measure up fully to the ideal version you have in your head.

Personal Constructs

How evaluation actually takes place and how we perceive the world are the result of **personal constructs**, individualized ways of construing or understanding the world and its contents; they are bipolar dimensions we use 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 prototypes and to determine how close someone may come to meeting all the criteria. Using a romantic partner again as an example, the following personal constructs could be used:

Attractive–Unattractive

Kind–Mean

Passive–Aggressive

Intelligent–Ignorant

Humorous–Dull

Employed–Unemployed

personal constructs:
individualized ways of
construing or understanding
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bipolar dimensions used to
measure and evaluate things

Transacting Identities: Communication and Performance

We began this chapter by presenting basic ideas about identities. We continued by discussing how people understand identities—and other things—based partly on their perceptions. Now, we will examine how identities are performed symbolically, something we touched on briefly earlier in the chapter. We will talk about performance here, then talk about self-disclosure, and then talk about the communication of other people.

Through their performance, identities can be understood as being transacted (created, maintained, reinforced, or transformed) symbolically through communication with others. Performing personal identities, then, includes communicating and behaving in ways culturally understood to represent those characteristics. For example, a kind person might talk in ways and do things that people would consider kind. Or a fan of musicals might spend the day humming the soundtrack to *Rent* when not talking about his or her favorite Broadway performers. Performing relational and social identities includes communicating and behaving in ways culturally associated with those roles. For instance, a parent will communicate as a parent is expected to communicate and will do parent-type stuff, whatever that happens to be.

Demographic-based identities are also performed or transacted, but we will spend a bit more time on this one, since it is where people might claim that a core self exists. After all, they might argue, a person is born biologically male or female, born a particular race, born homosexual or heterosexual. Though all true, cultural understanding and norms influence the symbolic activities associated with these categories. Further, a person may choose to not conform to those symbolic activities or may choose to emphasize or disregard these identities when communicating with others. So, even though demographic-based identities are those a person is born with, they are ultimately socially and symbolically created and performed.

Front and Back Regions

Sometimes identities are performed without a great deal of purpose or strategy. They just sort of happen when people communicate. Other times, identity performance is very purposeful and strategic.

front region: a frame where a social interaction is regarded as under public scrutiny, so people have to be on their best behavior or acting out their professional roles or intended “faces” (contrast with *back region*)

back region: a frame where a social interaction is regarded as not under public scrutiny, so people do not have to present their public faces (contrast with *front region*)

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 sprung into action not 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.

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 situations.

Transacting Identities: Self-Disclosure

Another way that people establish identities is by telling people about themselves. If you ask people to tell you who they are, they will tell you their names and start revealing information about themselves, usually with stories that place them in various contexts, but they will tend to use socially recognized criteria about identity. Here, we are dealing with self-disclosure.

We will begin by telling you a bit about Steve Duck. *Steve Duck* is a proper name—a first requirement socially for identifying oneself—and it 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 30 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 exactly 867 CE (*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. 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 to rescue two seriously wounded (armed) comrades. Steve 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.

Self-Description or Self-Disclosure

Notice that some of this information about Steve's identity involves characteristics people might use to describe him without knowing him personally (e.g., male, bearded, short, bald, two watches). This **self-description** usually involves information about self that is obvious to others through appearance and behavior. If you wear your college T-shirt, talk with a French accent, or are tall, these characteristics are available even to strangers. In many cases, characteristics of self-description position a person within categories (e.g., national, racial, or ethnic groups). It is not really an individual identity but is more about group membership.

Some points in Steve's description of himself count as **self-disclosure**, the revelation of information that people cannot know unless a person makes it known to them. In this 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. Self-disclosure often involves the revelation of private, sensitive, and confidential information. Values, fears, secrets, assessments, evaluations, and preferences all count as such confidences that you share with only a few people.

Self-disclosure enables people to talk about themselves, which establishes value to who they are and reinforces how they view themselves (or how they want to view themselves). It also enables people to influence how they might be seen by other people (McMahan & Duck, forthcoming).

Dynamics of Self-Disclosure

So far, self-disclosure might sound favorable and fairly straightforward. In fact, it has traditionally been viewed that way. Like most things, though, it is more complicated than one might originally think and more complicated than traditionally understood.

The Value of Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure was traditionally seen as beneficial to identity construction. Sidney Jourard (1964, 1971) originally wrote about self-disclosure as making your identity "transparent" to others. People who are transparent in this way are acting in the most psychologically healthy manner.

Self-disclosure was also traditionally seen as beneficial to personal relationships, especially in the development of relational closeness (Altman & Taylor, 1973). If someone shares something personal, you might feel valued and trusted because that person let you into his or her inner life. You might also feel safe in sharing something about your life with him or her. As disclosure continues, people increase levels of closeness, and the relationship is strengthened.

Good, Bad, or Nothing

As you read this next section, we do not want you to think that disclosure is unnecessary or without value. However, simply engaging in disclosure does not guarantee that good or intended things will happen.

self-description: description that involves information about self that is obvious to others through appearance and behavior

self-disclosure: the revelation of personal information that others cannot know unless the person *makes* it known



How many people in this photo are performing a social role and its accompanying identity requirements? Be sure to justify your answer.
iStock.com/Rich Legg

When someone self-discloses information, three possibilities may occur. First, you might feel honored that someone trusts you with his or her secrets. And, that person may be successfully creating a desired identity and a desired connection with you.

Another possibility is that you do not like what people are telling you or they disclose too much information. You do not appreciate the fact that they can burp the alphabet after taking a single drink of Mountain Dew. Or, they might tell you other information you deem too intimate or private given how you view your relationship with them.

The third possibility is that you simply do not care about what you are being told. In this case, disclosure has little to no impact on identity construction. And, disclosure itself does not make a difference to a relationship; the relationship makes a difference to the value of disclosure. Ultimately, if you feel the relationship is enhanced by self-disclosure, it is. If you do not, then the relationship does not grow in closeness.

Disclosure and Privacy

Just because information is available to disclose does not mean that it will be disclosed. You choose to disclose some things to some people. There may be some things about yourself that you have never disclosed to anyone. As such, privacy is an issue of disclosure. Fortunately, there is a communication theory that deals with just that topic.

Communication Privacy Management (Petronio, 1991, 2002, 2013) theory explains how people manage the need to maintain privacy by negotiating boundaries of privacy with others. You possess information about yourself. Some of this information is stuff about which you would *not* care if other people knew. Some of this

DISCIPLINARY DEBATE

HOLD THE ONION

Although the idea of a core self was debunked earlier in the chapter, Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) is a classic theory in the discipline of communication with that idea at its “core.” It is sometimes referred to as the “Onion Model” because it suggests an inner core self is covered up with layer after layer of information and characteristics right out toward the surface skin. If you cut an onion in half, you will see the way the analogy works. This theory maintains that it is ultimately impossible to reach that core self, but information just waiting to be revealed can be mined in the attempt. Because it seems pretty simple and because people may feel that who they are is fairly stable and is deeply embedded within them, this model has persevered in the discipline of communication, despite the lack of research support for it (Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981). Notice this past reference even includes one of the original theorists!

In spite of no support, in spite of one of the original theorists discrediting it, and in spite of research actually supporting opposing views, this nearly half-century-old theory and model is still included in many textbooks and courses.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think this model has persisted? We offered its simplicity and a commonly held belief in having a core self. Can you think of any other reasons? Your professor might be impressed if you come up with the “Ogres are like onions” speech from the movie *Shrek*. One of the writers for that movie must have taken a communication class.
2. Can a model that explains something simply (making something complex easier to understand) but inaccurately still have value?

information is stuff about which you *definitely would* care. Such information might make you feel quite vulnerable. People, therefore, tend to feel very strongly about controlling who has access to information about them and how that information might be shared.

Boundaries are developed to protect this information, with some people being allowed access and some people being prevented from access. These boundaries are determined partly by the relationship. One difference between friendship and mere acquaintance, for instance, is that you have stronger boundaries around your identity for acquaintances than you do for friends.

Boundaries are also established to protect certain information or topics. When it comes to romantic relationships, for instance, sex-related topics are met with privacy considerations (Brannon & Rauscher, 2018). Your closest friend may know you better than anyone else but not have access to certain information you possess about yourself. People in personal relationships tend to cooperate when it comes to maintaining these boundaries. Your best friend, for example, may know not to ask you about a particular topic.

Of course, just because such boundaries exist, that does not mean that they will remain intact in their present form. These boundaries may experience *turbulence*, the term used within Communication Privacy Management. Turbulence is said to occur when boundaries are reshaped and revised in some way.

Turbulence may occur when boundaries come under attack. For instance, someone might ask you a personal question, and you make it clear to that person that you do not intend to disclose that information. You might also make additional moves, such as avoiding future contact with that individual.

Turbulence may also occur when boundaries are revised due to changes in how a person evaluates the need for privacy about a particular topic. Lesbian, gay, and queer teachers often experience tension about disclosing or concealing their sexual orientations to their students (McKenna-Buchanan, Munz, & Rudnick, 2015).

Turbulence may further occur due to changes in how a relationship is perceived. A person might determine an acquaintance to now be more of a friend and share information with that individual. Interestingly, such changes in determination might occur after a boundary attack is recognized. A personal question is asked, and a person might determine to let that person through based on recognizing that relational changes have taken place. Traditional-aged college students often experience turbulence with their parents (Ledbetter, 2019). Their relationship is different, but it is not always clear what relationship actually exists. And, quite often disagreement exists in how this new relationship is defined and understood.

Narratives

Self-disclosure may be accomplished through story form. People often use stories to tell others something about themselves and help shape a sense of who they are for others. Actually, people tell stories about themselves all the time. When doing so, they pay special attention to what they say, particularly depending on the occasion and on the audience.

Consider narratives that might be shared during a job interview. If asked about your experience at your previous place of employment, you are essentially being asked to share the story (or stories) of your experience at your previous place of employment. Chances are



How do you explain the fact that a person can experience different sides of self and hold different views simultaneously?
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pretty good that people will tell the story about the time they saved their employer a lot of money and not the time they trashed the place after big fight with their boss.

Narratives about the same event will also be told in different ways depending on the audience. If teenagers are asked about a party they attended, the story they tell their parents will likely be vastly different than the story they tell their friends.

Constructing the Story

Stories you tell are generally organized according to Kenneth Burke's Pentad, discussed in Chapter 3, on verbal communication. As you will learn, the elements of the pentad reveal what a speaker deems to be most important, what the speaker wants the listener to focus on. These elements are *act* (what happened), *scene* (situation or location of the act), *agent* (who performed the act), *agency* (how the act was accomplished), and *purpose* (why the act took place).

When you tell someone a story about yourself, the elements you deem most important—by focusing on them in the story—provide people with a guide for understanding who you are. More specifically, the elements you deem most important provide people with a guide for understanding how you *want* them to understand who you are (McMahan & Duck, forthcoming).

Transacting Identities: Other People

The shaping of stories to suit a particular audience highlights the importance of other people in the transaction of identities. Actually, we could get philosophical and consider, similar to whether a tree falling in the woods without anyone around makes any sound, whether someone attempting to construct an identity without anyone around is really constructing an identity. For example, is the Broadway musical fan mentioned previously creating an identity when humming along to show tunes alone in the car? Or does the development of identities require someone else being there?

Essentially, it is communication with others that enables you to exist as a unique person capable of interacting within society. You become a you because other people treat you as a you through communication! That actually makes things a lot more confusing than it needs to be, though, and we will simplify it a bit in the next section. Discussing the symbolic self will reinforce the importance of symbolic activity and the importance of other people in the creation of identities.

We will continue by discussing how identity construction takes place through the ways in which people treat you. We will also talk specifically about the notion of altercasting.



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

Your identity is shaped by culture and the people you interact with, and this affects the way you communicate, how people communicate with you, and how you perceive the communication of others. This is because you can reflect that your “self” is an object of other people’s perceptions.

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 you and your society 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.

symbolic self: the self that is transacted in interaction with other people; that arises out of social interaction, not vice versa; and, hence, that does not just “belong to you”

Another way of thinking about identity, then, is in terms of how broad social forces affect or even transact an individual's view of self. 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 their 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 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; instead, you do what you think people will accept. You may end up doing something you don't want to do because you cannot think of how to say no to another person in a reasonable way. You cannot just stamp your foot and shout, "I won't!"

Your identity, then, is not yours alone but is partly adopted from society and so affects your credibility. 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.

Self as Others Treat You

How people perceive themselves and their attempts to construct identities are influenced by the ways in which they are treated by others. Both directly and indirectly, your interactions and communication with other people shape your views of yourself.

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 up, they might have drawn out from you some sense that you were still a child, which might have caused you to feel resentment. If you are intelligent and people treat you as interesting, you may come to see yourself as having a different value to other people

symbolic interactionism: how broad social forces affect or even transact an individual person's view of who he or she is

attitude of reflection (symbolic interactionism): thinking about how you look in other people's eyes, or reflecting that other people can see you as a social object from their point of view

ETHICAL ISSUE

ALTERCASTING FOR RIGHT OR ALTERCASTING FOR WRONG?

Consider situations in which imposing an identity onto someone might be considered unethical. Is it unethical to tell people that they are strong when attempting to get their assistance with lifting a heavy object? Is that situation unethical if you really do not believe they are strong? Is encouraging your classmates by telling them that they are smart and will do well on an upcoming exam unethical if you really do not believe either to be true but are saying it to help?

Questions to Consider

1. What criteria would you use to determine whether altercasting is ethical or unethical?
2. How might someone else oppose the criteria you suggest?

than does someone 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 to make people respectful. Your manner of communicating comes to reflect expected reactions to you. Although your identity begins in the way you are treated by other people, it eventually becomes transacted in communication.

Altercasting

altercasting: how language can impose a certain identity on people, and how language can support or reject the identity of another person

Altercasting involves the work that someone’s communication does to impose, support, or reject identities of others (Tracy, 2002). *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.

Altercasting may also refer to the rejection of someone’s identity. Just because someone attempts to create an identity does not mean that it will be accepted. It could just as easily be rejected by other people. You may know someone who attempts to come off as tough or dominant, but other people may reject this identity. Rather than trembling in this person’s presence, people may make fun of

this person or do things to intimidate this person.

Conversely, *altercasting* may also refer to communication that accepts and supports the identity of someone. Perhaps people do accept that person’s tough and dominant identity. In this case, their communication may support this tough and dominant identity by giving that person more space or not making eye contact with that person.

In all these situations, the communication of other people is influencing the transaction of someone’s identity. The construction of identity does not take place in isolation; rather, it depends partly on other people.



How is your sense of identity represented by connections to the past?
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Learning Outcomes Revisited

1. Explain the basic assumptions of identity construction.

People do not possess core, unchanging selves influencing actions and waiting to be disclosed. Cultural groups to which you belong provide you with ways to describe and evaluate identities. Identities are created in the context of personal relationships. People perform their identities with others.

2. Explain the processes of perceptions.

Perceptions involve the processes of actively selecting, organizing, and evaluating information, activities, situations, and people, and essentially naming and giving significance to all the things that make up your world.

3. Explain how identities are transacted through communication and performance.

Through their performance, identities can be understood as being transacted (created, maintained, reinforced, or transformed) symbolically through communication with others. Sometimes identities are performed without a great deal of purpose

or strategy. They just sort of happen when people communicate. Other times, identity performance is very purposeful and strategic.

4. Explain how identities are transacted through self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure enables people to talk about themselves, which establishes value to who they are and reinforces how they view themselves (or how they want to view themselves). It also enables people to influence how they might be seen by other people.

5. Explain how identities are transacted in connection with other people.

Your identity is shaped by culture and the people you interact with, and this affects the way you communicate, how people communicate with you, and how you perceive the communication of others. This is because you can reflect that your “self” is an object of other people’s perceptions. Further, through altercasting, the communication of others can impose, support, or reject identities of others.

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Communication and You

1. Beyond the fact that some of the identities we transact are based on relationships shared with others, much identity work takes place through relationships in general. Our relationships with others provide us with opportunities to develop who we are and how we want to be perceived by others. Through relationships, we develop trust so that we may disclose personal information about ourselves. And we come to understand ourselves through our interactions with others. A person cannot have a concept of self without reflection on identities via the views of other people with whom he or she has relationships. How have your interactions with others allowed you to develop a particular identity? How have your identities been supported or challenged through your interactions with others?
2. Beyond the fact that some of the identities we transact are based on cultural membership, such membership informs people about the value of identities and the proper ways of constructing those identities. And your identities are based partly on the beliefs and prevailing norms of the society in which you live. When you communicate with other people in your culture, you get information about what works and what does not, what is acceptable and what is not, and how much you count in that society—what your identities are worth. What types of identities are valued in some of the cultural groups to which you belong? In what ways does the same identity (e.g., friend) seem different in different cultural groups to which you belong?
3. Physically attractive people often act confidently because they are aware that other people find them attractive. Conversely, 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, conveying intelligence, or developing a talent). To what extent do you find that this research confirms your own experiences in life? Do you think this applies to other such characteristics as humor, intelligence, and talent?

Technology Connections

1. Your own identity work on social networking sites may not be something you have considered or realize that you even do. Have you ever spent time looking at two (or more) different photographs of yourself, trying to figure out which one to post? Have you ever edited text you have written because it did not convey what you wanted to convey about an experience you had? Have you ever untagged an unflattering photograph of yourself or untagged a photo of yourself doing something you should not have been doing? If so, you have engaged in identity work through these sites. What other things have you done through social networking sites to develop a particular identity?
2. Examine the social networking sites of some of your connections on those sites. Do their identities created through those sites match the identities they tend to transact offline?
3. Now go back to considering your own social networking sites. Have you ever struggled

with a post because some people in your social network (friends, family, classmates, coworkers) would take it the wrong way? Perhaps it would show you in a different way from which those people are used to seeing

you. Or, do you have multiple accounts for different people in your social network? What might these struggles or multiple accounts tell you about the existence of multiple identities?

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