

Environments and Raw Materials of Identity Fabrication: A Communication-Ecological Account of Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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Abstract

Contextualizing the results of a recently completed extensive study on the fabrication of collective identities and group identities, this paper traces the politicized uses of collective identities from a communication-ecological point of view. Identity construction is depicted as composed of emergent social processes with communicative, pre-communicative, and non-communicative episodes that distill their components from different environments. Practical identities are distinguished from objectified identities. Collective identities are portrayed as the raw materials for the fabrication of group identities and individual identities. Three examples help to illustrate the political dimensions of collective identities. The paper concludes by hinting at the social-theoretical implications of the outlined production model of identity construction.

Keywords: communication, ecology, group identity construction, collective identity, environment.

1 Introduction

This paper traces the politicized uses of collective identities from a communication-ecological point of view, relying on the results of a recently completed monograph on the fabrication of group identities. Identity construction will be depicted as composed of emergent social processes with communicative, pre-communicative, and non-communicative episodes that distill their components from different environments, such as emotional, technical, institutional, discursive and spatial environments. In order to develop a fine-grained view of identity construction processes, a conceptual distinction is drawn between practical and objectified identities. Collective identities are defined as raw materials for the construction of group identities as well as individual identities. The construction and divulgation of these materials are traced, illustrating their political dimensions with the examples of the German Federal Constitutional Court's decision to implement a third gender category, the production and uses of the Basque walking stick *makila*, and the narrative of Venezuelan rebel leader Óscar Pérez. Regarding the propagation of collective identities, special attention is paid to markets of collective identities. Fictional extensions of groups are discussed as aims of politicized labor on collective identities.

First, the concepts of communicative and pre-communicative processes will be addressed to establish the base for introducing the group concept employed in this article. Subsequently, collective identities will be distinguished from group identities and individual identities. The ensuing discussion of markets and environments of identity construction processes leads to the examination of politicized uses of collective identities. The paper concludes with the depiction of fictional extensions of groups as objectives of political labor on collective identities and a brief consideration of the social-theoretical implications of the outlined production model of identity fabrication.

2 Communicative and Pre-communicative Processes

In general, one out of two topoi guides the talk about communication. The first topos depicts communication in an information-theoretical manner as a process of transmission, focusing on the "sender" or the "message." The other, less common topos portrays communication as a process of steering, control, or guidance¹, focusing primarily on the "receiver," or rather the "listener"² or "hearer."

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Although the transmission model has been widely criticized from different perspectives (Juchem 1985, 5-7; Loenhoff 2002, 137-139; 2010a; 2010b; Luhmann 1998, 193-196; 1999, 163-166; Schmitz 1994; 1998, 56-57; 2018; Seel 2010, 52; Ungeheuer 1987; 2004a; Bateson 1999; etc.), it still persists in everyday life and sciences as well as humanities. Without a doubt, the transmission model of communication reduces complexity and thus acts “relieving” in the sense of Gehlen (2004). Moreover, developments in the history of ideas, in media, and in technology contribute to its persistence. Natural sciences and engineering may host projects where the epistemological difficulties of the transmission model do not make a difference for the results of research. In social sciences and humanities, however, the model leads to aporiae as soon as doubts are raised regarding, e.g., the context-invariance of meaning, the unidirectional nature of communication, or the unambiguous, a historical, and empiricist detectability of emotions. The listener cannot be conceived of simply as an external observer decoding signals and assigning information values according to the likelihood of signals. He is an active interlocutor who entertains a relation of mutual guidance with the speaker.

To avoid the epistemological impasses of the transmission model, Karl Bühler’s (1978, 82-96) concept of guidance will be employed to describe and explain processes of communication. To Bühler, guidance is always guidance mediated through a “synaptic cleft” and, accordingly, self-guidance. In order to ensure a differentiated description and explanation of social processes, communication will be distinguished from observation.

In the following, the term “communication” refers to an emergent process of mutual guidance between at least two persons or social entities that employs semiotic-medial instruments and is propelled by the reciprocal attribution of messaging intentions. The aim of this process is to establish understanding on the listener’s side.³ As a result, communication facilitates the coordination of communicative and non-communicative action. Let me illustrate this conception with the help of an example. If someone (A) scratches his head, someone else (B) might think that A is greeting him, that is, attribute the intention to A that he wants to communicate something to B. This person might just greet back or become confused, since the two are strangers to each other, and ask: “why are you greeting me?” Whatever the case may be, from the moment of the response on, A is, or rather his actions are, part of a communicative process because in the case of conventionalized gestures and especially language in interpersonal contexts it is basically impossible for listeners not to attribute a messaging intention to the speaker. An exception of this rule would be that someone shouts in anger using verbal language in a forest without any identifiable address. Unlike most nonverbal signs, verbal language, according to Luhmann (1999, 209-210), is such an improbable phenomenon that it is almost impossible not to attribute a messaging intention to the person who uses it.

Communication is emergent because, as I have illustrated, its dynamics do not depend on individual intentions. In the example above, interlocutors were rather drawn into a communicative process without necessarily wanting it. The simple act of scratching one’s head triggered communication.⁴ Another illustration of communication being an emergent process can be found in conflicts where all involved parties try to solve the underlying problem but get stuck in the communicative, individually uncontrollable dynamics of a quarrel. Due to its emergent way of operating, communication is considered the basic unit of analysis. Its characteristics cannot be described or explained by referring only to its components and environments. The consideration of technical, medial, socio-cultural, semiotic, anthropological, etc. parameters alone does not account for the emergence of communicative processes.⁵

Communication, however, is not the only form of interpersonal or intergroup contact. There is also observation of others. A can observe that B’s shoe is open, that he is nervous, or that he spilled his coffee over his shirt. In these cases, A would usually not think that B wants to tell him something. So, A and B would not enter the special manner of building up complexity (or order) characteristic for communicative processes. That also means that, unlike Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1996, 53) suggest, not all observable behavior is communicative behavior. When A’s observation of B or B’s behavior, however, influences the communicative processes they might entertain simultaneously or afterwards, I call the act of observation a pre-communicative process. A can, e.g., start a conversation, asking B if he is nervous, or adjust his communicative style in order to make B feel safe when they are already communicating.

The difference between observation and communication is essential for phenomena of authenticity. If we see someone wearing an expensive watch and think this person only wears it to tell us something, to make an impression on us, it is hard to believe that the person’s self-presentation is authentic. Thus, Luhmann (1983, 132-134; 1985, 444) speaks of the incommunicability of authenticity.

In turn, Goffman (e.g., 1956; 1966) delivers a plethora of examples of face work techniques and self presentation in everyday life that are usually not perceived of as communicative action but as authentic behavior.

3 Collective Identities, Group Identities, and Individual Identities

The following considerations depart from the assumption that a group is composed of communicative, pre-communicative, and non-communicative processes that *de facto* take place among its members. The French, the Italians, the Germans, the Hipsters, the Lesbians, the Jihadis are social categories, not groups, unless it can be proven that actual interactions among all French, Germans etc. take place. Such categories can be called imagined communities (Anderson 2006) or “fictional extensions” of real groups. Let us turn to an example inspired by Hansen (2009). Imagine the passengers of a bus consist only of French and Germans. Group constitutions can orientate on age, gender, hair color, taste, etc. However, if a football match between the German national team and the French team is broadcasted into the bus, chances are that groups are being built around national belonging. That still does not mean that the French group and the German group in the bus are part of bigger, national groups. This belief of belonging to a supposed entity of all French or all German people rather has to be considered a fictional extension of the existing groups in the bus.

Apart from social practices shared by the members of a group, a group needs an identity to be called a group. I distinguish between practical and objectified identities. Practical identities can only be discerned when objectified identities are established. Take two people who are caught up in a conflict or fight. Undoubtedly, they share a common practice. This, however, does not necessarily mean that they constitute a group. In order to speak of a group, the involved persons must consider themselves, objectify themselves as a group of fighters. Only then the social practice of fighting becomes recognizable as a practical identity. The same is true for laughing, bricklaying, conducting research, etc. This is not to speak of a collective consciousness, a group mind, or collective intentions like some social epistemologists (e.g., Pettit 2011), social ontologists (Tuomela 1991; Tuomela & Miller 1988; Gilbert 1990; 1992; 2009; Searle 1990), or orthodox Hegelian scholars would. The concept of practical identities is derived from Heidegger’s (1967, 69-76) concept of readiness-to-hand, whereas the concept of objectified identities corresponds to the Heideggerian term “presence-at-hand.” Practical identities are ready-to-hand, pre-predicative, pre-reflective, or embodied; objectified identities are present-at-hand, predicative, reflective, or propositional.

On the group level, practical identities resemble, *mutatis mutandis*, Tomasello’s (2009, 39-47) notion of group identities as facilitators of collective action. On the individual level, practical identities can be compared to, e.g., Mead’s (1913, 375) “I” that “can never appear immediately in conscious experience,” Rousseau’s (2001, 144-152; 2009, 212-213) self-conception on the basis of “amour de soi-même,” and Sartre’s (1983, 13, 489) “réflexion pure.” In turn, objectified identities bear similarities to Mead’s (1913) “Me,” Cooley’s (1967, 184) “looking-glass self,” Rousseau’s (2009, 212-218) self-conception on the basis of “amour propre,” and Sartre’s (1983, 423-426) “réflexion complice,” among others. Unlike in these approaches, however, social processes are not only relevant regarding the construction of individual identities. They are also the constituents or carriers of group identities. Thus, these identities have no ‘existence’ outside of social processes.

The distinction of practical and objectified identities applies to both group identities and individual identities. Collective identities, however, are always to a certain degree objectified because they constitute the raw materials out of which groups and individuals fabricate their objectified identities. In the literature, individual identities are mostly referred to as social identities, which, like Willems and Hahn (1999, 15) point out, conveys the false implication that there are any non-social identities. Thus, the term “social identity” is avoided here.

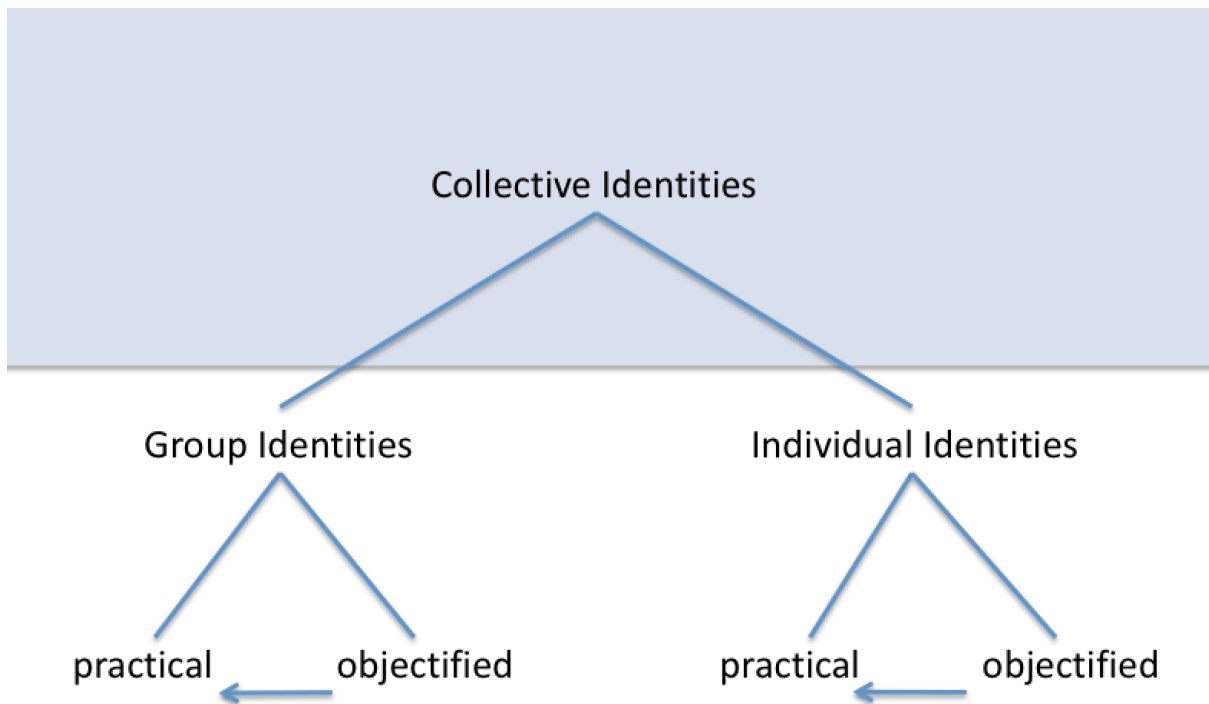



Figure 1: Relations among different types of identities.


The diagram shows the relations among different types of identities. As raw materials that are by definition to a certain degree objectified, collective identities are situated on another logical level than group and individual identities. The arrow indicates that practical identities can, *mutatis mutandis*, only be identified when objectified identities are established. The range of possible means to objectify practical identities and fabricate collective identities is very broad, which can be illustrated by the following example. Through market research, the company Procter & Gamble identified various styles of toilet paper use in order to create market segments, out of which two were relevant for the company's marketing efforts. The difference of "folders" and "scrunchers" even makes a difference in international comparisons (Schramm 2005). Simultaneously, the difference is usually not part of everyday life semantics or self-descriptions. A quick search on the Internet, however, leads to the counterintuitive finding that people even bond and create groups, objectifying their cleaning practices with the help of the collective identities of "folders" and "scrunchers." The distinction from others goes hand in hand with the cohesion of the group. Even in this trivial context, the 'dark side' of group identity construction emerges – albeit only ironically:

Womplord

13 POSTED: 30 August 2012 5:41 am

Premium Member





Posts: 563
Joined: 14 Feb 2010

Scruncher. When I take over the world, I plan to exterminate all folders.

Figure 2: Collective identities in processes of group identity construction.⁶

4 Environments and Markets of Identity Construction

Luckmann (2008, 33) underlines that “human action does not create anything out of nothing” (my translation). In order to avoid the impression that social practices are constituted *ex nihilo*, the definition of communicative and pre-communicative processes has to be supplemented with an ecological production model that does not bear the materialist connotations that it evokes, e.g., in Marx’s version. Communicative and pre-communicative processes distill their components from different environments. Environments are understood neither through the lens of Jakob von Uexküll (1909, 5) in the sense of actively constructed acting spheres of organisms nor with Luhmann (1999) as correlates of sense-processing autopoietic systems that serve the reduction of complexity. Environments are rather the sources of raw materials for communicative and pre-communicative processes. As such, however, they are to be understood as results of a network of past processes that in every current process is present as a practical disposition established through the process history and/or as a narrative objectification of past processes.

Unlike Luhmann (1999, 30), I do not consider environments ontological facts but analytical constructs of an observer that help to highlight certain aspects of identity construction. Since from a communication-theoretical point of view identity construction is composed of communicative and pre-communicative processes, these environments can also be understood as environments of identity construction. I distinguish between eight environments: technical, psychic-personal, semiotic-medial, discursive, juridical-institutional, group, emotional, and spatial environments. These environments can be regarded societal environments in the sense that the processes the environments are correlates of are connected to other processes and thus cannot be utterly contingent.

Both the construction of group identities and the construction of collective identities distill their components from raw materials derived from their environments. Persons, signs, elements of discourses, institutionalized interaction models, and techniques belong to the components of social processes. Unlike group identities, collective identities circulate on markets of collective identities in a figurative and also non-figurative sense. On the one hand, there are markets to purchase actual products like luxury cars or mugs decorated with the face of Che Guevara. On the other, there are markets of information on competing and complementary identity related offers. These markets can be found, e.g., in political discussions, carnivalesque events like Anzac Day or Christopher Street celebrations, talk shows, educational settings, psychotherapy, and even academic conferences. From the perspective of group identity construction, these markets come into view as particular environments that are distinguished from other environments due to their offer of ready-made building blocks for identity fabrication. To exemplify this theoretical framework and to depict the politicized uses of collective identities, three empirical illustrations will be discussed in the following.

5 Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

On October 10, 2017, the German Federal Constitutional Court (1 BvR 2019/16) ruled that lawmakers had to implement a third⁷ gender category until the end of 2018. This decision would not have been possible in the discursive environments of this court 50 years ago. In the context of nowadays’ identity politics, however, it can even be seen as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1982, 19-20; 1983, 185-187) for lawmakers entrusted with the creation and implementation of the category. A first draft issued by the government’s scientific advisers proposed “other” (anderes) as the label for the new category. Other proposals comprised “another” (weiteres), “inter,” and “diverse,” out of which the latter was finally chosen for the bill. The means of communicatively institutionalizing the category range from the academic education of lawyers and practical jurisdiction to mass and social media contents. As in the case of the legal categories of Black and White in the USA or the former paragraph 175 of the German penal law that, among other things, criminalized male homosexuality, it is yet unclear whether or in what way the collective identity of a third gender will be used in actual group identity construction processes. In fact, different voices from social movements, non-governmental organizations, and political parties have already criticized the category for not serving the needs of intersex people.

Like ISIS in Syria through its media channels (Spencer 2017, 262), Venezuelan rebel leader and former police officer Óscar Pérez employs the institutionalized romanticizing narrative of David and Goliath during his live broadcasts with the help of cell phones, mobile technology, and social media. Depicting himself as part of a weak but morally pure group facing a strong but immoral opponent helps him to construct a counter-hegemonic narrative as an alternative to the collective identity offered by the Venezuelan government. The discourses of family values and freedom or even free market, but also Catholicism are employed to counteract the hegemonic socialist discourse of equality, external sabotage, and necessary oppression.

Media veteran Pérez and his followers rely on a certain iconography that resembles historical Central and South American rebel groups, but also on pop cultural styles. The semiotic-medial environments and technical abilities assist him in dramatizing his own death as a heroic act on the social media platform Instagram. Like in the case of the third gender category, however, it remains unclear whether the collective identity produced and distributed by Pérez and his group will be used for the construction of other Venezuelans' group identities.



Figure 3: Óscar Pérez broadcasting a message on social media.⁸

In the Basque Country, the walking stick *makila* serves to express honor and power. It is literally produced in workshops that are often related to a long family tradition. In this tradition, not only the production techniques, but also the discourses and institutionalized models of the sticks' uses are handed down. The characteristic Basque font family is used for the stick's ornaments. Although even the Basque regional government employs *makilas* ritually as symbols of power and as gifts in the context of public relations, it does not necessarily follow that *makilas* are used by all Basque groups, such as the numerous culinary *sociedades*, to objectify their identities. *Makilas* literally circulate on markets and are thus ubiquitously available. From this fact does not follow, however, that they are considered necessary for the objectification of Basque group identities. On the contrary: their availability can also be taken as an indicator of their proneness to inauthentic uses.

6 Fostering Fictional Extensions in the Construction of Group Identities

Politicized labor on collective identities seems to aim at offering materials for fictional extensions of real groups. The concept of a third gender, the attribution of freedom and heroism to the Venezuelan collective identity, and even *makilas* seem to evoke the impression that groups can become part of a bigger whole by employing certain building blocks to objectify their identity. As explained above, however, this belief has to be considered a fictional extension of groups with no empirical correlate, unless it can be shown that these extensions are actually carried by processes of sociation, to use a Simmelian (1908) expression.

To conclude, I would like to put forward the hypothesis that the ecological production model of social processes does not only serve to describe and explain phenomena of identity fabrication but can also be employed as a foundation for designing a general social theory. Depending on the individual research interest, the focus can shift away from identities, situating them in the environments of social processes, whereas the phenomena in question such as discourses or emotions become the object of social fabrication processes. It could be necessary in the context of a general social theory that the total number of environments has to be increased in the sense that more analytical distinctions have to be drawn between different environments.

Like in the present context, however, processes with communicative, pre-communicative, and non-communicative episodes in and among groups would remain the basic units of analysis. The contingency of these processes is reduced through process histories and narrations. Although the theory is inspired by Luhmann, among others, it does not refer to “systems.” Likewise, the term “structure” proved to be unnecessary in the construction of theory. As a result, the impasses of Giddens’ (1984) postulate of a “duality of structure” were avoided. Conversely, ‘pre-differential’ processes other than the blind shift from one side to another of Luhmann’s bifurcative schemes can nevertheless enter the subject range, without neglecting the relevance of objectifications for the social practice like some practice theorists would.

7. References

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¹ The concept of guidance or steering is inspired by Karl Bühler's (1978, 82-96) "Steuerungsmodell." This model is an early precursor to cybernetic models. When employed in engineering, cybernetics is mainly concerned with the practical task of controlling processes. As a result, the term "control" is usually given preference over the term "steering" (Wiener, Ashby, and even Bateson). In this context, however, "steering" seems more appropriate. Bühler's understanding of "Steuerung" underlines that control is always auto-control, as external impulses are processed according to the internal logic of systems involved in a higher level interaction system. The term "steering" circumnavigates the connotation of causal control conveyed by the term "control" and emphasizes the process character of operations among interacting entities. Translations of Bühler's works (e.g., Halawa 2009) generally prefer the term "guidance" to "steering." For this reason, the term "guidance" will be used in the following.

² Bloomfield (1973) who primarily focuses on language uses the term "hearer," while Skinner (2014), considering language only one type among others of "verbal behavior," speaks of the "listener." Due to Skinner's focus on a broader range of signs and actions, the term "listener" is used in the following.

³ The listener constitutes the primary focus of analysis like in the writings of Schmitz (1994; 1998), Luhmann (1995, 115; 1999, 193-195), Bühler (1978, 101-102), and Bateson (2000, 118-120). For a more detailed discussion of the concept of communication see Kurilla (2013, 494-508).

⁴ Intention based depictions of communication such as in the writings of Austin (1962) and Searle (1965, 1969) fail to capture the emergent characteristics of communication processes.

⁵ Bühler (1978), Ungeheuer (1987), Bateson (2000, 113-114), Goffman (1983; 1999, 8-9), Maturana (1999, 166-167, 2000, 362-363), and Maturana and Varela 1987, 209-211) choose a similar approach to communication. Luhmann, however, presents the purest form of this conception, excluding all foundation relations ("Fundierungsrelationen," Loenhoff 2003, 180) from his viewpoint in order to focus exclusively on communicative operations.

⁶ Screenshot: <https://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/18.386624-Poll-Are-you-a-scruncher-or-a-folder>

⁷ Having in mind de Beauvoir's "Le deuxième sexe," the expression "third gender" appears rather conservative – if not threatening.

⁸ Screenshot: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Al3tjnXMVG8>