

Identities: a first exploration

Fred Spier, October 23, 2020

Leading questions: What are identities, and how do they emerge and develop over time?

- What is an identity? My answer: How to describe and characterize oneself or others.
- How do identities emerge and develop? Let's try it.

1. Boina asturiana/vasca

- A few people may know something about this hat, but most do not, I suspect.
- My self-perception of my identity may be different from any perceptions by others of my identity, even if they know about this hat and some of its relation to me.

The importance of distinguishing between self-perceptions of identity and perceptions of identity by others. Over time they may change through personal interactions, and, in doing so, may produce a complex process of identity formation and change.

The perceptions of my identity by others are only constrained by what the others associate with such a hat, the stories they know about it, so these interpretations may go into a great many directions.

2. Bowler hat (Coke)

- No one knows anything about me wearing such a hat.

Also this case, my self-perception of my identity may be different from any perceptions by others.

Again, the perceptions of my identity by others are only constrained by what you associate with such a hat, which is probably known to all participants, but with widely varying knowledge and interpretations. So they may again go into a great many directions.

In the meantime, you may have been looking at me, and at the interior of my room, and may have tried to deduce some identity from that. For instance, the book case suggests that I am a scholar of some sort. For instance, football players such as Messi and Ronaldo never pose in front of book cases.

Some of you may, by now, even conclude that this person is a little crazy. But that is also a perception of my identity.

What is clear from all of this that perceptions of identity are always connected with stories, about what happened before. Without knowing such stories, one is completely puzzled, and the resulting perceptions of identity may go all over the place.

3. Faja - chumpi

This is an example of a probably unknown object used in an unfamiliar way. I suspect that very few, if any of the participants know a story attached to this thing.

Yet if I were to go to Peru –the country where I have done my social science and history research, and which I keep following every day through the internet–, especially if I were to go to the city of Cusco, the former capital of the Inca empire, people would immediately understand what it means, especially when worn at public events, even though their interpretations and perceptions may still vary considerably.

Let me give away a bit of that story. Wearing such an object in public is intended to show that this person shows respect for the Incas and their supposedly proud past as well as for their currently living descendants, now mostly poor farmers and urban dwellers.

None of those stories have been written down explicitly, to my knowledge, but people in Cusco would all know this through many years of such public displays.

In this case there is a clear interplay between social pressure and personal desire. I might like to wear it, or I might not, yet I may also feel some social pressure to wear it in such a public display there. The outcome of the decision to wear it or not will result in many perceptions of my identity, as a process, more constrained than in the earlier examples.

With the earlier hats, there was no social pressure to wear them, but perhaps a desire on my part. Instead there may have been some anticipated social pressure not to wear them, because doing so may make me look weird in the eyes of others.

So in sum so far:

Perceptions of identities are part of ‘social regimes of behavior and interpretation’, processes in which social pressures, personal desires, and existing knowledge and interpretations all play a role.

4. Cusco flag

What kind of flag is this? Short explanation of the history of both the Cusco flag and the gay pride flag, both originating around the end of 1970s.

Resulting possibilities of considerable mistakes in perceptions of identities if one does not know the connected stories.

In this case formal social pressures begin to play a role, because the flag is often used at public events, while there is an official story about its history told by the Cusco authorities, resulting in some more uniform perceptions of identity, however still with many personal variations.

Are there official stories about the gay pride flag, and if so, how are they promoted?

5. Peruvian national flag

Like in every nation-state, the national flag is perhaps the supreme symbol of identity with the nation-state, with official stories imposed by national authorities, explaining the symbols, and the history of the state.

Even more than the Cusco flag, intended to shape uniform perceptions of (in this case national) identities, in which official histories and the power of the authorities play an important role. Yet in practice there may still be a great many personal variations of interpretations.

In this case there is more social pressure by the authorities to shape one single perception of national identity, including telling uniform stories about its preferably proud and heroic history. In practice, the resulting perceptions may still vary considerably, yet not as much as the first examples shown earlier.

So this is a social regime in which the social pressure to stimulate personal perceptions of identity is dominant. Over time, as people may internalize this knowledge and pass it on to the next generations, this interplay will become more complex. It will always change, and thus is a process of identity formation and change.

6. Earthrise photo with signatures astronauts

What about academic big history, and this photo, connected to big history (but not always?)?

No clear attempt in big history teaching to shape new perceptions of identity. For instance, at your exam you will not be asked to tell you what your resulting identity is, and be graded for it, while in public ceremonies of national importance you may be required to do such a things, such as saluting the flag, of singing the national anthem with with your hand on your heart.

Yet the big history account may result in perceptions of identity that are larger than those of the nation-state. And again, they may go into many different directions, because there is no conscious attempt by any authorities to shape and control them.

In sum:

Importance of perceptions of identity by oneself and by others, as part of regimes of behavior and interpretation, in which social pressures and personal desires all play a role, always connected with stories about the history of people and the material world that surrounds them, leading to many types of perceptions of identity.

All of this is only a first beginning. Could be added, for instance: uniforms of many types, masks, perhaps many other themes, all part of social regimes of identity.

Masks are used, for instance, to either conceal personal identities and/or create other identities. Think of Carnival, for instance, or of thieves wearing hoodies or balaclava hats.

Very rich and complex theme.