

## THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF IDENTITY

**Assoc.prof. Margareta BOACĂ\*, Ph.D.**  
"Carol I" National Defence University

*The article makes an analysis of the concept of identity and of the ways in which it is defined, through affiliation to the group on the one hand, and through the assertion of what makes us stand out, what we have different and unique, on the other. The two sides of the process substantiate the relevance of the criterion individualism/collectivism in differentiating between cultures: as identity is a basic human need, the two sides of the process of defining it make up a basic dilemma that all cultures have to deal with.*

*In historical perspective, identity was mainly defined as a result of living in a community and absorbing the values and norms of a certain culture, a process that characterized the making of the nation states in Europe and still greatly characterizes traditional societies in the world. Modernity in the western world gave rise to a new reality in which individuals gradually asserted themselves through what distinguished them from their communities. Now, globalization and the spread of the western model of development create for individuals and nations a large variety of situations and face individuals and groups alike with the demand of redefining identity and adjusting to new circumstances. Adjustment, projection and reconstruction of identity represent key processes that condition functioning in this changing world. The cultural trait of individualism is spreading in the world as a result of the economic and political processes.*

**Keywords:** *identity; individualism; collectivism; projection; reconstruction.*

Defining identity is acknowledged as an essential human need, and yet the mechanisms that are involved in this process prove to be most puzzling and difficult to control. Identities are on the one hand ascribed and on the other constructed or imaged. Identity is the product of self-awareness, in other words, we are what we think we are, and this leads often to situations in which ascribed identities are not accepted: individuals repudiate their family, do not assume their gender or age, do not accept their race etc. To define identity is difficult also because an important role devolves upon the other or others: identity is defined and validated by others and in relations to others.

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\* e-mail: [margareta.boaca@gmail.com](mailto:margareta.boaca@gmail.com)

Freud speaks about the narcissistic processes through which humans develop their identity<sup>1</sup>. An external image, taken over from the Other, is internalized and considered to be the identity. In the type of relationship defined by Freud, the leading role in the process devolves upon the Other. The Other is the active participant, the Other is the author of the image which is passively taken over and assimilated: we very often try to conform to a model or an image that others project upon us; we very often do what we are told to do, we become what we are told to become.

In addition, sometimes there is a great difference between the identity that we want project and we suppose we project and the way it is actually perceived by the others. Constructing and reconstructing one's identity requires self-awareness, perpetual attention, analysis, and decision-making. So identity is the result of subjective appraisal, in other words, the subjective appraisal of ourselves or of the others, and identity is continually changing: we change and yet we are still the same.

Nevertheless, since it is an essential need, one way or another, at one moment or throughout our lives we have to deal with it.

The changes determined by globalization and by the spread of the western model of development have also affected the process of defining identities. More than ever before the need to re-define, re-construct, in other words to adjust to changes, is imperative. In the adjustment and reconstruction of identity, the Self assumes the leading role, while the Other or several Others provide the necessary the backdrop against which the process is developed.

### **Collectivism vs. Individualism**

As identity is an essential human need, the cultural dimension of identity is present in all cultures. Specifically, it takes shape as the polarity collectivism/individualism, included in the two basic sets of criteria designed for analyzing cultures, one devised by Geert Hofstede<sup>2</sup> (2001) and one by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden Turner (2004) and it is used by many other authors in describing cultures. This testifies to the validity of the criterion in defining cultures. The polarity individualism/collectivism reflects two alternative sources of identity, the degree in which within a culture people are seen as functioning as individuals or groups, the extent to which a

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1951.

<sup>2</sup> Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences. Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations*, second edition, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2001, p. 140.

certain culture gives priority to the desires, needs, pursuits of the individuals or the interests, aspirations or needs of the group. Identity is therefore defined through what the individual holds in common with the group, the community, the common attributes that he shares with the group and make him identify with the group, a characteristic of collectivistic societies, or through what the individual asserts as different from the group, what makes him/her unique and differentiates him/her from the group, a source of identity which is characteristic of individualistic societies.

In collectivist cultures, affiliation to the group represents a consistent source of identity.

Collectivistic societies are characterized by strong social relationships that provide unconditional support all life long. They originate from and reproduce the community of the believers and depending on culture and society, the various groups, with which individuals identify are the family, community, corporation, the nation, etc<sup>3</sup>. Common ethnic origin and culture - language, traditions, common history, religion – provide an extremely well-articulated type of collective identity, as, just like the community it is based upon, all its elements support and consolidate each other. The essential characteristic of this type of community is that it provides an understanding shared by all its members, an understanding beyond words, that should not be produced. It is due to this understanding that people remain united, in spite of all kinds of separating factors<sup>4</sup>, so the sense of identity this community offers has a high degree of internal cohesion, stability, endurance and perpetuation. Looking in retrospect, particularly when considering the risks and vulnerabilities of present life, one cannot help noticing how reassuring this reality was and what a strong feeling of security it provided.

The other side of the process of defining identity consists in the assertion of what is specific to each individual. The individual is no longer interested in reasserting the ties that connect him/her to a community or group, but wants to assert his/her needs, interests, desires and in this process he comes to assert what differentiates him/her from the others. Individualism was born and generally characterizes the western world, where it has been shaped by historic processes such as the Renaissance, the Age of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the American War of Independence. Modernization triggered off by the Industrial revolution uprooted the

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<sup>3</sup> Fons Trompenaars, Charles Hampden Turner, *The Seven Cultures of Capitalism. Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, second edition, London, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2004, pp. 29 -156.

<sup>4</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society*, New York, Harper, 1963, in Zigmunt Bauman, *Community*, Polity Press, 2001, p. 9.

individual from the traditional community, so that the division of labor, specialization, secularization, work in factories and life in the new urban centers dissipated the influence of the traditional community<sup>5</sup>. The new circumstances of industrialism and the modern epoch faced the individual with choices which he had to make on his own. New laws regulated his life, new norms glorified individual interests and desires and prompted the individual to act in order to achieve them. In the process of building an independent self, the individual became no longer disposed to share the results of his/her efforts with the members of the community. Consequently, ties with the traditional community weakened, families as a whole reduced and the individual developed personal mechanisms that helped him cope with new realities. In this process, the individual no longer identified with the community, no longer benefited by the support of the community, but relied on his own capabilities and resources and depending on circumstances, on the support and integration into smaller groups of people who shared the same interests at a certain moment.

### **Individualism in the age of globalization**

As a form of maximum interdependence at the level of the entire planet, globalization has had tremendous impact in a multitude of fields: economic, technological, political, social, cultural, military. Unlike the modern times in which culture was to a great extent confined to local areas and suffered limited influences, culture nowadays is more diverse, symbolic and dynamic. Values, beliefs and lifestyles are extremely dynamic in space and time. Unprecedented access to communication technologies have hugely multiplied cultural influences and radically changed the nature and dynamics of economic, social and cultural life. As Ulf Hannerz<sup>6</sup> remarked, the world looking like a patchwork of separate cultures, clearly separated from one another, remained far behind.

*The disintegration of traditional communities became inevitable when the processes of communication inside the community were gradually offset by the communication between the community and the outside<sup>7</sup>. Once the ties with the source of identity provided by the community were cut or weakened, to redefine identity becomes a vital necessity.*

*Postmodern theories on identity maintain that ethnic and national identities are not primordial, but situational, and much more important than*

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<sup>5</sup> Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, *Idem*, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in Social Organization of Meaning*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> Zigmunt Bauman, *Community*, Polity Press, 2001, p. 11.

*national and ethnic identity are the social class, economic development, global interdependence and secularization, so the individual is looking towards new groups with which he/she can identify. The situational context offers opportunities for the realization of various sides of identity, in a world that provides a wide range of possible identifications from which the individual has to choose. An important consequence is the fluctuating nature of identity, as people tend to identify themselves with several social groups – several Others – (created on the basis of not only race, ethnicity, but also gender, social class, occupation, age, multiple leisure activities, etc.), one of these factors being essential at a certain point, depending on situation<sup>8</sup>.*

The new views of identity highlight not only the fragmentary nature of identity, but also its transitory character and the necessity of its permanent reconstruction, as they see modern life as an excursion through various social environments, with the successive realization of a number of possible identities<sup>9</sup>. (I have shown elsewhere that this view on identity has a powerful cultural determination, as the western civilization offers the individual the chance to assume a variety of roles, with the result that the discourse of identity assimilates roles to identities)<sup>10</sup>. Duchesne and Scherrer highlight the fact that it is not identities that are multiple, but the social identifications of the individual. They have tried to identify certain recurrence patterns in the way the individual identifies with affiliation groups, and as a result they suggested that the concept of identity should be regarded as a force of social organization<sup>11</sup>.

In this context, the individual acquires a more important role. As there are no natural relations to connect people and the people are the artisans of their own connections, as Stuart Hall maintains<sup>12</sup>, it is the responsibility of the individual to determine the relevance of his/her connections. Cultural identity is to a much lesser extent “ascribed”<sup>13</sup>, inherited and assimilated, and much more constructed from elements chosen depending on personal affinities and

<sup>8</sup> Colleen Ward, Stephen Bochner, Adrian Furnham, *The Psychology of Culture Shock*, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> Welsch Wolfgang, *Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today*, in *California Sociologist*, 17&18, (1994/1995), pp. 19-39.

<sup>10</sup> Margareta Boaca, *Identitate și rol într-o perspectivă interculturală, (Identity and Role from An Intercultural Perspective)*, Paper presented at annual international scientific conference of the “Carol I” National Defence University, „Strategies XXI”, 2009 and published in the acta of the conference.

<sup>11</sup> Sophie Duchesne, Vanessa Scherrer, *L’identité politique comme force de conflictualisation et de hiérarchisation des appartenances sociales: justification théorique d’une définition empirique*, in *Identité(s)*, Actes du colloque de la MSHS de Poitiers, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003, pp. 325-336.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, in Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Sociology*, London, 1991.

preferences, by personal choice and decision. The individual has to build his connections and to choose from the “global cultural supermarket”<sup>14</sup> those elements that best express his/her own identity at a certain moment.

The positive aspects of the process relate to the very rich opportunities to develop one’s own personality. The postmodern era gives great importance to the concept of diversity and the process of defining one’s identity by asserting what the individual holds different from the others. Given the variety of cultural elements to which people have access through the new media technology, theoretically they have the chance to build extremely rich and diverse identities, according to the forcefully asserted postmodern slogan “I have the right to be different”.

However, the whole process is neither simple nor devoid of difficulties. Let us remember that even the most “objective” aspects of identity are not automatically integrated by individuals, and the “objective” identity and the feeling of the identity are sometimes quite wide apart, as the extreme example of transsexuality illustratively shows. During a lifetime human beings have always had to deal with the reconstruction of identity, as some periods of our lives necessarily impose smaller or greater, easier or more difficult, positive or negative identity changes. Becoming a parent or grandparent, changing profession or job, divorce, retirement etc., are events that require deep-going processes of identity adjustment and reconstruction, and people are not always successful in coping with it. However, the identity challenges that have to be faced in the age of globalization are so much greater and stressful than these, faster, and more frequent, and very often unexpected, they have wider scope, such as those involved in emigrating, so adjusting to a new culture, new society, new town, new job, communication in a new language. Consequently, the reactions of resistance and rejection, which in fact are the symptoms of identity crisis, the incapacity to project and reconstruct the identity, are so frequent. An identity crisis is an instance in which the individual is stuck in an identity that functioned at a certain period in time and place, but which is no longer in tune with the new realities. This gives the individual the frustration of no longer understanding and identifying with the new environment and the rejection of a reality he does not understand. Incapacity to adjust and reconstruct identity is a phenomenon that plagues the world today. In the case of immigrants, for instance, leaving the home community and culture and facing the imperative of integrating into a new cultural environment pose huge problems related to the reconstruction of identities, and few individuals can deal with these successfully.

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<sup>14</sup> Gordon Mathews, *Global Culture, Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*, London, UK, Routledge, 2000.

According to Manuel Castells, the resistance identity – the phenomenon which other sociologists call identity crisis – is a reaction to the prevailing social tendencies and an attempt to provide a refuge in the face of a world, whose rapid pace of change represents a threat. Refuge is sought in cultural and religious values that functioned as a source of identity at a certain time in history, but now, they provide a defensive identity whose main purpose is resistance to change. The way out from the resistance identity comes through the projection of identity, a difficult but not impossible process at the level of a community. From resistance to projection into another possible identity that permits integration into the new trends. In this way, according to Castells, the resistance identity is through projection the most consistent source of identity in the post modern epoch<sup>15</sup>.

Another risk is that infinite possibilities to choose from and the lack of a reference system and of axiological criteria to guide the choices can bring about what is called “the despair of choice” or can make the individual choose at random what is aggressively promoted by the media. The construction of identity takes place in the world of representations. In order to shape our identities we use symbols, and we take them from the past, from everyday life, from different lifestyles, from the heroes of various cultures, etc. The danger here is to consider these identity signs the identity itself, in a relationship of the “form without content” type. The individual identity built in this way is extremely fragile and ephemeral, it lacks foundation, substance, memory and therefore future.

### **Conclusions**

The two ways of defining identity – through what the individual holds in common with the community and through what distinguishes him/her from the group – are complementary. On the one hand, the national cultural heritage means a very solid foundation of values upon which to build your identity and it provides a strong feeling of affiliation and certainty. Cultural specificity is the contribution that national cultures bring to the richness and diversity of the world. To ignore your heritage means to deprive yourself of a very powerful and rich source of identity. However, the globalization of the western model of development changes the stress from this kind of ascribed identity to individually projected and constructed identities, a process which imposes heavy demands upon the individuals. Given the rapid changes in the world, the projection and reconstruction of identity represent a crucial necessity in order to survive. Constructing and reconstructing identity needs the solid foundation of the cultural heritage of his/her community, and also needs continual education, communication, self-awareness.

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<sup>15</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, Culture*, vol. II, Oxford, 1998.

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