

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Identity As Action. Methodological Implications For The Study Of Cultural Identity From A Historical - Cultural Approach



This paper is part of a large project about cultural identity runned by the *Laboratorio de Actividad Humana* (Universidad de Sevilla).

Before presenting our position about cultural identity, we are going to describe briefly the Social Psychology perspective about this concept. Social Psychology is the most influent perspective in the study of cultural identity in the psychological discipline. We are going to talk about this tradition as the “alter” in front of which we are constructing our theoretical and methodological approach to identity from an argumentative point of view.

Social Psychology considers self-concept as the element that articulates and integrates the person’s different social identities. The self-concept is conceptualized as a complex scheme organized in categories and classifications. Then, the research planed in this tradition have the aim of searching and reflecting that organized scheme. To get that information, researchers study social identities in artificial laboratory environments, where the subject has to answer questions about his/her social adscriptions in a categorical fashion.

The main problem with that method is that when understanding social identity as a categorically structured entity, these researchers search for categories, and by doing that they do not allow subjects to express themselves about their identities as they would do in their everyday life. Everyday expressions of cultural identity do not fit the researcher’s theoretical criteria and methods. The consequence of this is a disintegrated and fragmented idea of identity.

We think that other ways of studying identity are possible without renouncing to empirical research. Showing that is the main goal of this presentation.

We are going to propose an approach to cultural identity from a cultural-historical

perspective. From this point of view we understand that:

a. *Identity is created through social interactions*. We must search for identity mechanisms and construction processes (not only identity contents) in the social processes where they are originated.

b. *Identity is mediated by cultural tools*. The construction of cultural identity, as other superior psychological functions, is mediated by cultural tools, mainly by semiotic tools (Wertsch, 1998). The use of a given set of instruments not only will configure identity itself, but also the nature of its trigger functions.

c. *Identity is situated* (linked to institution of practice/ cultural activity settings). Cultural identity is a socially situated process. To understand that process, we should analyze the social settings where it takes place.

Considering the cultural setting as an essential piece in this comprehension process means accepting something more than recognizing the influence of social variables in the individual psychological processes. It means mostly to accept that it's in these institutions where not only contents, but the functional organization of cultural identity, are created, regulated and transformed.

d. *Identity must be studied through genetic analysis*. Identity processes will be studied through a genetic analysis. The evolution of the identity construction must be studied. Then we'll be able to analyse how a person acquires new mediational tools, following the track of these instruments from their social origin, in the interpsychological level, to the person's mastering of them, by their appropriation in a intrapsychological level.

e. *Action can be used as unity of analysis*. We understand identity as an action that aims to define or characterize, in some way, one's belonging to a group. Action is an unit of analysis which allows the inclusion and coordination of both individual and social factors. Action, understood from a historical-cultural psychology, becomes in this sense, a powerful analytic tool since action does not conclude at the individual level but transcends it allowing us to analyse identity at the social level. This concept of action facilitates the study of cultural identity construction, as they can be examined at the interpsychological level.

We can regard cultural identity as a psychological function as well as memory or thought, and thus it is sensitive to be studied with the same analytical tools as other psychological functions, that is, by means of the actions or acts of identity.

Acts of identity can be understand in three different ways: identity as communicative action, identity as rhetoric action and identity as mediated action.

a. *Identity as communicative action* (inspired in Habermas (1987) theory of action). Identity acts can be understood as communicative actions. According to Habermas, we can talk about three kinds of action that coordinated jointly conform the communicative action: teleological, dramaturgic, and normative ones.

- Teleological action: Strategic/directed to some objectives and goals. When a person performs a cultural identification act has the aim of reflecting about the traits that define him/herself in relation to his/her cultural belonging group in front of other people.

- Dramaturgical action. Strategic access to speaker subjectivity. The second kind of action that Habermas described is the *dramaturgical action*. The agent tries, intentionally or not, to make the audience identify with his/her state of consciousness, his/her private world. The dramaturgical action takes a special value when we talk about cultural identity, since it is part of the tapestry that, together with other identities, constitute our private personal world. Then, when we talk about our cultural identity we are performing a manifestation of our thinking that has as referent a part of ourselves, a part of how we perceive ourselves, and in sum, a part of our subjective world.

- Rule-governed action (linked to social-cultural settings of practice). This kind of action points on the socially situated component of cultural identity. In this sense, a social group can demand a given actor to behave in a given way depending on the agreements that regulate interpersonal relations in that social group.

b. *Identity as a rhetoric action*. Also we can approach identity as a *rhetoric action*. Identity is not mere informative action. We have regarded cultural identity as actions generated in communicative social interactions. However, we can not understand these actions as simply informative ones. Identity acts are arguments created to persuade and convince our audience about which are the traits that define ourselves in relation to our cultural group. In this sense we could talk of identity as rhetoric actions. We cannot consider cultural identity as a kind of internal representations as it is understood from traditional social psychology. Contrarily, cultural identity is configured and developed in the rhetorical act. In fact, many times we get conscious of how our cultural identity is when we expose it in front of the "other", an audience.

Rhetoric action is addressed to the others and to oneself; Identity implies to argue about one-self or about a perceived belonging group (cultural, ethnic,

professional,...). The acts of identity can also be considered as rhetorical actions aimed to persuade the audience in the framework of a communicative event. We regard rhetoric as a moral instrument. The basic idea of this notion implies that with the accomplishment of the acts of identity, the agent presents an argument in order to persuade his/her audience, and also an argument influencing and modifying his/her own point of view. As Billig (1987) points in his works on argumentation: “the structure of the way we argue reveals the structure of our thought”. In the process of individual deliberation, we use the same arguments that we employ when we try to persuade others.

c. Identity as mediated action. Mediated action is usually understood as an irreducible tension between cultural tools and agent. That allows us to examine how different tools get dynamically integrated to explain processes as cultural identity in the sociocultural and individual frames. This characteristic makes action-mediated-by-tools a resource that allows overcoming the methodological individualism spread in many of human sciences works in the western tradition. By definition, action allows considering simultaneously the agent that performs it and the cultural instruments that he/she uses. Mediational instruments configure acts of identification of subjects. We can suppose that studying the mediational means the individuals use to build their arguments, we can study the way they build their identity.

Taking into account the theoretical position we are defending in this paper, we propose discussion group as an scenario for the study of cultural identity.

Discussion group. An ideal setting to study acts of cultural identity.

The discussion group has a special psychological significance for researches precisely because of its interactive nature it allows the study of cultural identity in formation. The discussion group requires and permits exposition, conflict and negotiation of points of view and experience meaning, involving an effort of behalf of the participants to create shared realities (communicative action). It permits access to new ideas, the search of agreements, the possibility of arguing and counterarguing to expound own opinions and to try to persuade the others, features that finally redound to new ways of understanding the others and ourselves (rhetoric action).

Since negotiation in an interpsychological plane is explicit, a discussion group facilitates observation of the process of individual appropriation of ways of argumentation and reflection about him/her self, or about his/her belonging

group, that are initially found on a social plan. Therefore the discussion group gives us a setting to study how the acquisition and mastering of new forms of thought and speech genres are used to construct personal or cultural identity. In a discussion group, we can examine how individuals' acts of identification try to create a common opinion in audience, at the same time that they show the own image, but we can also observe how that personal image is being reconstructed externally and internally in the course of discussion.

From the approach we have defended in this paper cultural identity can be considered as a rhetorical discourse that develops in the frame of a communicative event. But: how can we analyze this discourse?

We will use Bakhtin's theory to differentiate several aspects of discourse:

- *Utterance as empirical unit of analysis* (Bakhtin 1981).

First of all, we have to establish an unit of analysis. As Bakhtin points, discourse does only takes reality in the concrete moment and context it is performed. That is, in the concrete utterances that people use to talk. Then utterances are the real unit of analysis of communication. In our study the utterance as unit of analysis can be understood as each participant's turn-taking, each participant's talk without being interrupted.

We can study different dimensions of utterances:

- We can study the generic form of utterance. This refers to the utterance's formal aspects, that is, its compositive structure. In this sense, we can distinguish two different elements:

In one hand, the dimension particularization-generalization. Billig's (1987) contributions about two opposite processes such as particularization and generalization seems very useful from a rhetoric perspective.

On the other hand, from psycholinguistic contributions we can establish different discursive styles: explicative, expositive and narrative.

- Semantic referential content: all utterances are constructed from elements that participants use to construct their act of identity, and in front of which they take a position. In this sense, we are interested on analyzing these topics used to construct the acts of identification and the position the speaker takes referring to it, that is, the utterance's orientation. In the case of cultural identity, the orientation shows if the person considers or not the trait characterized in the utterance about a cultural group's identity a differential trait from this group.

- Finally, the notion of voice. With that notion we study the perspective adopted by the subject when constructing the act of identity.

From this methodological perspective different empirical research can be carried out. We can ask or not how our participation in different sceneries or from some experiences, we get new mediated tools that will shape new acts of identity. In this sense, we have studied the influence of several experiences and social settings in the development of cultural identity. These are:

- Literacy practice.
- Emigrant experience
- Historical experience

In these empirical studies we analyze how different practices or experiences are related to different ways or arguing.

As a final comment we can say that our methodological proposal is studying cultural identity through the acts of identification that people perform to define themselves. These acts are communicative, rhetoric and mediated, as we have developed in this paper.

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