LEVELS OF IDENTITY IN INTERACTION

IDENTIFYING OURSELVES AND OTHERS
Recall for a minute the last time that you met someone new. Probably, without thinking, you were evaluating that person and comparing yourself to them. It’s normal. If you and I meet on the street, I want to know who you are. And I want to make sure that you get a good impression of who I am. Whenever we come into contact with others, we often ask ourselves identity questions.
In our own society, we often have clues about reading others identity. We can tell by their accent where they might be from, from their dress what their occupation or educational level might be, and from their manners what kind of family background or quality of life they seem to have. From very young we have learned how to “read” the status and identity symbols of people that we are familiar with.

IDENTITY ACROSS CULTURES
But across cultures, this issue of identity is often confusing. Different countries have different clues. We may not be sure what a firm handshake means, or direct eye contact, or a pin-strip suit, or many other symbols that are not common to us. Whenever we lack knowledge, we need to make up for it with sensitivity. Observing, politely asking, and interpreting all become vital skills toward trying to understand someone from another culture.
Each person’s identity is a complex combination of many factors. For some people, their nationality is very important. Often local friends try to explain patterns here by saying, “you see, we Chinese.” There is a strong sense of national culture among Chinese (but to call it “nationalism” might not be completely accurate, as it is more of a deep love and respect for a sense of thousands of years of shared history and “the motherland”). Some Americans might prefer to call a sense of “patriotism” and have deep feelings towards all that the American flag, freedom and democracy, and “God bless American!” represents. Parents of such families might glow with pride when their son or daughter joins the military for the defense of those freedoms. Other Americans identify more with what they consider to be this American way of life, doing things “the American way,” or striving for a level of high material success to fulfill “the American dream.” Others may have more nuanced view and ask, “What type of ‘American’ are you referring to?” and focus on regional, ethnic, or other important differentiations among those who make up important parts of the ever-more multicultural USA. Such views illustrate how variable and complex views of cultural identity can be, even at the national level!

Beyond national, ethnic or cultural issues, our identity might be in our singleness or marital status, our parenthood (how many children we have), our major, profession or specialization, our geographic hometown or other things we have in common with others. In highly individualistic countries, identity is often rooted in one’s personal
achievements, in ones uniqueness experiences or personality, in one`s special hobbies or interests. These are all identities that distinguish us from others. In fact, we need both types – related identities and unique identities. But often Asian cultures tend toward more common links, while Westerners emphasize their unique features.

RECOGNIZING COMMONALITY AND DIFFERENTIATION

Each of us carries our identity into a new encounter. How we view ourselves exerts a strong influence both on how we consider ourselves and our expectations as well as how we consider others.

If I’m down on the basketball court with a bunch of male classmates, I subconsciously run through a checklist: I’m a guy, so are they. I’m a student, so are they. I’m good at basketball, so are they… I quickly feel at ease because I’m among equals. We’re standing on common ground and can connect easily (albeit physically) on the court. The common points of our identity quickly make other features of my identity a non-issue.

So now I start working on establishing that “I’m a better shooter than you are,” “I’m quicker to the baseline and can bank this shot in,” “I’ve got quicker hands and can steal that ball from you.” Our interaction of sweat, effort and hustle translate into non-verbal, sub-conscious identity distinctions. “You’re not getting by me this time!” “Hey, watch this super shot I have!” I work hard to show you and others what I’m good at, better at or best at to distinguish myself.

This same process goes on every day in work or school. In one way, I’m trying to relate to others and establish a common group of friends or equals. In another way, I’m comparing with others, trying to figure out what I can do better. This subconscious attempt at both commonality and at distinction is what makes relationships interesting and complex. But across cultures, it can easily cause confusion, misunderstanding, or even cultural incidents.

DEEPENING LEVELS OF IDENTITY

PUBLIC FEATURES

What makes the process even more complex is that our identity is rooted in different levels. Each of us is like an onion. We have a colored skin on the outside, but under that are layers and layers of juicy content. If you saw me in class, you’d immediately recognize that I am a white Anglo-Saxon man, probably from America or Europe, who wears a beard, seems to be in my 40’s (you’d note my graying hair!), and if you saw the ring on my finger, must be married. All of these outward observations reveal public identities. These are things you can see or infer without much effort.

PERSONAL FEATURES

But everyone also has personal identities. As the English saying states, “You can’t tell a book by its cover.” To really get to know what is important to someone, you have to
“read” him or her. Going deeper usually involves purposeful conversation. We ask questions, we listen carefully to what people say, we note when they smile or get excited about a topic, and we slowly infer what they seem to take pleasure or interest in.

We may be very interested in many “personal” topics, like a person’s marital status, exact age, salary or other personal information. But unfortunately, these are not open topics in every culture. To be a good student of culture, we need to learn what are taboo or private questions. And we may need to find other ways of asking that information.

I may want to know if an American is married, but I probably should not ask directly. Even if I did, with the higher rate of divorce in America, how would I ever know if this is his first spouse or his second? Instead of asking, “Are you married?” I can invite them to “Tell me about your family.” In this way I let them decide what they want to tell me – what is important to them.” The phrase, “So, tell me a little about your self,” is always a good way to learn more about what someone finds important or identifies with.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL FEATURES**

At an even deeper level, we have psychological identities. This includes our deepest feelings, our opinions and attitudes, how we really view others, and ourselves, and many other hidden thoughts. Sometimes, as a relationship deepens, people open up and share some of these very private, inner things. But some of them may even remain hidden from their marriage partner or best friends. At this level, there must be a high level of trust and willingness for self-disclosure for us to share these deep aspects of our personality or personal history. That is what makes friendships or marriages strong, but also vulnerable. It is what makes all communication challenging and exciting.

In the next learning step article we’ll explore how these different identity levels affect communication gaps. And we hope to give you some suggestions on how to relate your identity to others more effectively. Perhaps this article has already opened your eyes to some new thoughts on how you view yourself or others. It might help you to know that identity clarification is an unfolding process.

**Recommended Citation:**
