

# Theory for the Study of Identity

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## Abstract

**Summary:** Identity is a state of reality, a construct we make of what we perceive. I understand by state of reality the moment of our existence in which we are being. We are the embodiment of society that provides us with the contexts from which we interpret what we perceive; we are also an existence of our own, in which we formalize reality from our particular point of view. We form at the same time a social identity, a personal identity, which are not opposed, but are inserted structurally from the construction we make of reality.

## Keywords

Identity, Social Identity, Personal Identity, Construct, Reality, Formalization

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## 1. Introduction

The identity is a state of reality, a *construct* that we make of what we perceive. I use the category *state* in reason that manifests quality, condition, circumstance, character, nature, temperament, and the category *construct* in the sense that expresses construction, creation, disposition, ordering; we understand by state of reality to the moment of our existence in which we are being, in which we are existing. In the concreteness of our existence, we find ourselves with the condition that at the same time, we are an incarnation of the society that provides us with the contexts from which we represent ourselves, and we are also an existence of our own, in which we formalize reality from our particular way of observing. Identity is a constant experience in the concretion of our existence. It is an event that happens, a response to a certain situation, a constant process of change that has as a necessary reference to history that allows us to understand who we are, since from this reference our actions have a sense of continuity with the idea we have of ourselves, a reference that is based on the way we interpret reality. At all times, we are building reality, since this is an interpretation that we make of what we capture through our senses; when we perceive we formalize, it

is from the way we give meaning to what we perceive that allows us to be before known realities, only the form is incomprehensible; the formalization that we make of what we perceive depends on the criteria of interpretation that we have learned based on the learning processes that we receive, which corresponds to the structures of society where we have taken these contexts, which are in relation to the living conditions of the members who share them. We are the incarnation of history; of the way we have learned to interpret the phenomena of the past. We are the manifestation of the future, which from the perspective, emerges in our image and behavior. We are, above all, in a present that is in constant transformation, in which the multiple elements that make us up occupy different degrees of hierarchy, influencing the assessments and decisions that we are making at all times.

## 2. The Construction of Reality

Our sense of reality, behavior and appearance, manifest the structures that underlie and are maintained within social groups, due to social conditions of existence. These structures are references for the interpretations and behaviors, which give rise to the formation of identity. The social identity starts from the knowledge that the individual has of belonging to a social group, where we find evaluative and affective meanings that are related to the belonging that implies the segmentation of the social environment and the self-location in one of the segments to which it is usually called *group of belonging*. The feeling of belonging to a territorially determined group is one of the foundations of social identity, which is called territorial identity, which, although it varies in terms of the intensity and sense of affection, depends on the different individuals and the circumstance in which they find themselves when they value their attachment to the space of belonging. The territorial identity is of great relevance, being a basic dimension from which the construction of identity is elaborated, becoming for some people the fundamental base in the construction of their social identity; in this dimension we can find different levels of ascription, since these territorial ties are close and focused (city, town) or correspond to wider contexts (country, continent) that complement each other and acquire their relevance depending on the particular conditions in which the subjects that carry out their assessment of their territorial belonging are found.

Although there are subjective elements of shared self-identification among the members of the social group of affiliation, forming the consciousness of the “we”, there are also objective elements based on language, culture, shared historical past, and territory. However, the subjective element, which is the self-awareness of group membership, is the fundamental basis for the formation of social identity, “it is the awareness of membership that is really important, the self-identity as a member of that group” (Sangrador, 1996). For this reason, Alfonso Caso takes this subjective element as fundamental for the definition he proposes of the category indigenous, using the following argument: “Awareness

of belonging or not belonging to an indigenous group is, however, the most important feature from the subjective point of view ... Every individual who feels that he belongs to an indigenous community is an indigene; he conceives of himself as indigenous because this group consciousness can only exist when the culture of the group is fully accepted... But a group that does not feel that it is indigenous cannot be considered as such, even if it has abundant somatic and cultural features that place it among the indigenous, if it has completely lost its ancient language and already expresses itself in Spanish. Such a group will be mestizo, and a large part of the population of our countries is made up of these groups, conserving on a smaller or larger scale, somatic or cultural elements of indigenous ancestry” (Caso, 1971: p. 89, 90).

In the construction of a group identity a multi-group reality is required, which is necessary for the distinction between the members of the group and those who are not, since it is from this that the identity based on the *we*, is formed, which is realized in comparison to *them*. “To have an identity is to know oneself as different ... social identity arises from the comparison and differentiation with other groups ... In that sense, national identity would not be so much ‘what we are’ (in an abstract sense), but rather the result of a rational process by which we perceive ourselves as different (and generally better) than the groups that surround us” (Sangrador, 1996: p. 26). Although for the conformation of the social identity of adscription, the sense of belonging is fundamental, which is given by the subjective elements that make up the sense of the *we*; it is not the subjective elements that base the adscription that we give to others through the *they* or *the others*, but we create categories based on specific historical processes.

Although the collective identity is created within the recognition of a certain homogeneity that exists as soon as we are a product of socialization, we are our own experience with our concrete needs so that if homogeneity, social identity, exists as soon as we share the way of interpreting reality, this being a product of our subjectivity is a particular construction of the one who perceives it, so the same stimulus is not interpreted exactly in the same way by all those who perceive it in spite of the shared social conditions of existence. We form at the same time a Social Identity, a Personal Identity, which do not oppose each other, but are inserted in a structured way, forming the construction we make of reality and which is manifested, in part, through the idea we have of ourselves and in the way we interpret others, since we are also built on the basis of differentiation.

We are our own experience, although influenced by the criteria of interpretation that we have been formed, as experience that is, is necessarily personal; we share criteria of interpretation from the idea that we have, which is acquired based on a *we*, which as an element of identity is promoted within the same society reaffirming the elements of collective identity, which of the construction of reality, homogeneity, we have when we see ourselves reflected in our fellow men; however, there is particularity in homogeneity, in fact, homogeneity is the manifestation of agreement between particularities, the objective in science, for example, is an agreement of subjectivities; not only should we not think in strict

terms of homogeneity, we are also a process of constant change in which the different elements that make us up affect our perception and interpretation of reality, depending on how important their presence is at a given time; our moods can determine the perception even change the sense of communication that a gesture can cause us, the interpretation we make of reality depends on the constant changes we are having, as the knowledge, we integrate it into us by transforming ourselves.

In the structuring of Western culture, the formation of an awareness of individually has been the support of social organization, the structures on which the law rests subordinate to it in function of the individual, something very different from other cultures where the individual being does not exist as in the case of India where the social being is everything and the person is in function of society, finding its logic in hierarchical structures to which the person is subordinated. On the basis that the holistic societies are understood hierarchically is that it is difficult to be understood in the western culture where it is understood, and taught, that the individual is everything, while for these other cultures is the society and not the individual from where the referents to give birth to the reality is constructed, "The society, with its institutions, values, concepts and language is sociologically previous to its particular members, who only become men through education or adaptation to a certain society" (Dumont, 1987: p. 51). To understand existence based on an egalitarian or hierarchical principle is a fundamental reality from which reality is constructed, but whether it is a society based on individual consciousness or on a holistic consciousness, these forms of understanding reality start from social training; therefore, traditional societies, which use the category of individual to designate their members, have in common with modern societies, the social man who is the link that unites them and it is thanks to this that we can approach their understanding (Dumont, 1970: p. 5-11). "Today it is fashionable, with no more value than that of a mere fad, to reproach anthropologists for melting radically different cultures into the mill of our categories and classifications and sacrificing their distinctive originality and ineffable character by subjecting them to mental forms specific to an epoch and a civilization. If by this we mean that a translation is never perfect and that it is inevitable that a residue of meaning will escape it, we are certainly right, but this is merely a statement of commonplace, and of the simplest. On the other hand, those who claim that the experience of the other, individual or collective, is incommunicable in its essence, and that it is absolutely impossible, and even guilty, to claim the elaboration of a language in which the most distant human experiences in time and space would become, at least in part, mutually intelligible, these, I say, do nothing but take refuge in a new obscurantism" (Lévi-Strauss, 1981: p. 8).

The image that we have of ourselves and that we try to show, this attempt to present ourselves through appearance, language, smells and with our actions, is the palpable manifestation of the interpretations that we make of the phenomena that we perceive, with which we have been socially formed, that locate us at

the same time that they identify and differentiate us within society and with respect to other societies. It is according to how the elements that make up our appearance are interrelated that we show the idea we have of ourselves and that is projected before the social world. These elements cannot be explained if it is not through society as a generator of identity, as society is the origin of humanization, and therefore, the place where the formalization we make of reality starts.

### 3. We See Ourselves in the Mirror That Is Us

Men see their image in the mirror of an *us*, in whom is reflected the idea that one has “The individual sees himself as ‘being’ a series of attributes and ‘belonging’ to a series of collectives, and individually organizes these attributes and belongings, which are social matter ... it is the consciousness of the individuals that embodies the group, since the individuals constitute a group, in principle, by the mere fact of reciprocally referring to a ‘us’, of feeling that they belong to a ‘us’, provoking the existence of a ‘them’” (Pérez Argote, 1986: p. 80, 83). We interpret and are interpreted in a process of constant feedback and the judgments of others influence our own judgments, we value ourselves by being valued and with these judgments, which are also in constant change, we make evaluations, even of our own image and behavior. Many of the behaviors are accepted and not questioned by the so-called common sense, in a knowledge as if it were innate what is valid, what is not, what can be beautiful or not, what is just and unjust, everything that is shaping the interpretation of social reality that we have and from where the related elements in broad social sectors start. “We learn to perceive, differentiate, classify and value social objects, such as ethnic groups; and each culture and subculture teaches its members a specific system and axiological code of ‘judging’ others” (Calvo, 1990: p. 349). Society reaffirms us by embodying in our image the values it holds and in which it is sustained. Sometimes this sharing of similar elements occurs in restricted groups, and although some characteristics of the appearance may not be shared by broad social sectors, it is sufficient that it be shared by a social group for the cultural manifestations to be maintained, This permanence in time is a product of the social structures that are based on the particular living conditions of the groups in question, of the social actors, manifesting itself as a “habitus” understood as a practice coming from structures that have been maintained within a given social group, due to conditioning associated with certain conditions of existence.

“The conditionings associated with a particular kind of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable and transferable arrangements, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles generating and organizing practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their purpose without involving the conscious search for ends and the express mastery of the operations necessary to achieve them, objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being the product of obedience to rules and, at the same time, collectively orches-

trated without being the product of the organized action of an orchestra conductor” (Bourdieu, 1991: p. 92).

#### **4. The Idea We Have of Ourselves**

We are producers and products of culture, but even though we share many elements of collective identity, we should not think of ourselves as homogeneous, since we are our own experience and even though we have similar values, having been educated within certain contexts, we do not interpret reality in the same way. The values of similar behaviors, for example, do not have the same importance for everyone, and what is transcendent for some may not be so for others, or even for oneself, since the value judgments we make regarding some events vary over time. Although many elements of identity are shared within a society, we should not think of ourselves in a homogeneous way in strict terms, we are, in addition to social beings, particular beings, although we formalize reality from our own point of view since we give shape to it from our contexts, we are also a personal story with our desires, passions, fears and all the experiences that have made us similar? yes! but not equal. Society is made up of particular actors and it is men who make history with their decisions and their concrete acts, even though they find reason in the society where they are created and in their undeniable relationship with their biology, since everything passes through the body and environmental variables. By not understanding men as the real social actors, we deceive ourselves in the face of certain beings and without the possibility of varying what is expected of them, what the society that incarnates in them expects. Although it is society from which we obtain our contexts and it is thanks to these that we formalize our reality, it is also necessary to add that thinking of us in a uniform way is too imprecise since in many of the aspects of appearance our particularity is present, with our passions, tastes, fears, dreams, desires and in short all the particular things that make us similar? yes! But not equal! We are also a story, our story told by ourselves.

#### **5. Identity Is a Constant Process of Change**

We are an instant in which existence is realized, not yesterday or tomorrow, not even a moment ago when you began to see these leaves, it is now that your eyes rest on these letters and they tell you existence is an instant in time and within a moment I do not know what will happen, possibly you will continue or you will get up and eat something or go to lie down I do not know, even possibly not you, but what I can assure you is that existence is this moment in which you pass your sight on these lines that you interpret, We could even say that even the next word you read is not existence and that it will be so only when you are in it and not before or after, which does not deny the history or the possibility of certainty of foresight, but the empirical being is this being of experience that lives in the instant even if he does not realize it, regardless of whether he is striving for his future or whether his life is full of memories. Rarely do we realize that life passes

in a constant river in a flow without knowing it, and when we realize that life is an instant of existence, it pours out splendidly and in that moment we realize that we are, that we exist in addition to the desires that we set as our goal. The future is an abstraction that we use to be able to situate ourselves in time, that allows us to organize our life based on our priorities that we prioritize to determine how to conduct ourselves, some decide for immediacy and live passionately although perhaps closer to the abyss, on the line, at the limit, “that cares about eternal damnation to whom found in a second the infinite of enjoyment,” says [Boudelaire \(1948: p. 24\)](#) and shakes us to attack our values or better would be to say to tempt our passions. Others, who are the most, plan their lives to arrive at a future they hope will be happy, in which they will be assured of their sustenance by saving or investing in one of their children, relatives or close friends, in an exchange in which reciprocity does not occur immediately or of which little is obtained at first, but which will be collected when it is most needed, and others who have oriented their steps towards a more distant future in which the reward will be given to them when they die waiting to reach at that moment the full state of being.

And the past?, a yellowish file that is stored on the shelves of memory, experiences that are lost in the archive that is shrinking in time, to which we approach to select the volumes that tell us the story we want, that story in which the ideal being appears whom we always try to approach and that we believe encompasses us, but that is only a part of us, because we are many stories, even if we select only some to tell them, the image that we have of ourselves and that we try to show. “My memory is not good enough to lie, it teaches me to cope, to breathe. When it suits it, it blackmail me. Does it have anything to do with me? An exhibitionist dreamt of by someone, perhaps by the real one. How do we know if it is the real one? It does not know how it is, but it does know how it has been. Reality is a myth invented by each one of us, that invents each one of us” ([Cardoza y Aragón, 1986: p. 808](#)).

We cannot deny the ephemeral nature of the present because of the instantaneous nature of existence, nor can we deny that we have a pending account with our acts with what we did or didn't do, or that our life can change because of a fortuitous fact; The past and the future are more certain to us and this way of interpreting ourselves and therefore formalizing what we perceive has to do with the way we were taught to interpret reality, which is also the history of society from which we have taken those contexts that give meaning to what we capture and support what we say, which is why there is no form without a background, nor text without a context. It is the individual who formalizes reality according to his or her world of objects, that is why each person is faced with different realities, because each person formalizes his or her reality according to the world that is being built, that has been built for him or her; but in spite of being different, symbolic elements appear within a culture that make us have elements of collective identity so that we are similar, but not equal. Cognitive subjectivity is constructed, elaborated, this will depend on each person, on their biography, on



their biology. The reality in one goes varying and with time and with the passage of time one stops being, although not completely, who one was.

Identity is a constant process of change, nothing finished, everything in transformation because life is movement. The identity is not something immovable that is always there present, is an event that happens, is a response to a certain situation, to the extent that before another type of stimulus, is another identity that arises with another response. We cannot speak of having a single identity, and yet we are not the sum of multiple identities. Identity is a state of reality, a construct, a constant process of change. Identity is not something immovable; it is an event that happens; it is a response to a certain situation that determines the decision making. How predictable and mechanical we would be if we always maintained the same and invariable identity, but before an event and in particular conditions our response is also particular, as some of the determinants that influence our decisions vary, the response also varies, since man responds by making decisions determined by the events he faces and based on the fact that his choice is made on the basis of expected responses.

But if in some things we are changing, there are others that remain unalterable or very little altered and if some experiences may not have greater transcendence, there are others that permanently mark those who live them and which are not renounced, although to the extent that they move away as time goes by they become less and less present or are observed with another perspective, since the experience is one incorporating the memory as a necessary reference, so the experiences that as photographs in which time is trapped in the memory, are immersed in a slow and constant transformation in the consciousness, because man does not petrify himself and goes, even if he does not want to, changing by incorporating new experiences, only some are perpetuated which are those that form a substantial part of life, of our life, this life in which he is hierarchized, this life where passions cool down and rectifications occur, this life in which man is marked by some experiences and perpetuates them by remaining present in his consciousness and yet even these do not mean the same as they did in their time and although at all times it is their time, there was one in which the experience was lived in another way, in this constant being of change.

## **6. Our Thinking, the Last Stronghold of Our Intimacy**

We are so unique that we have unshared spaces, if we so wish, and we can shut ourselves up in our thoughts, an impregnable redoubt to which nobody can access if we do not allow it, because of the impossibility of getting there, to our intimacy, a fortunate quality that allows us to exclude ourselves in order to find a space of our own that is a refuge in the eyes of others, A place of rest which, like fresh water, gives us a moment of respite as long and as prolonged as our need, to clarify our ideas, to flee from the inquisitive question or to agree to let them know or not what is going on in our mind, and in spite of the fact that we have a close approach to our thought, there is an impregnable, unshared space to which



we can only gain access if we are allowed to, our thought. Perhaps you can know that you are lying or have an idea quite close to the sensation you are going through, but to know exactly what is going through our thought, impossible! this space is the summit of individuality, here nobody fits, it is only for one, perhaps it is allowed that somebody appears, but it is impossible that another one is in a permanent way there where only one lives, our intimacy, unquestionable right since on our body nobody without our authorization. Our thoughts protected by silence, powerful unknown, great in communicator who isolates us, great communicator who makes known that we do not want them to know, answer to what has no answer. It is in the silence and solitude where the deepest life of the private is developed, where one is only with oneself, immersed in intimacy, sheltered in oneself. "Solitude is the most perfect form of private life, its condition is self-absorption; and its execution, confession... Solitude does not consist in remaining alone. It consists of remaining alone" (García Morente, 1992: p. 49).

We live in a world of symbols and in these we find the meaning we give to things, commonly shared senses that we have learned since we began to capture life, knowledge is given in our subjectivity because we formalize what we perceive including our sensations that are at all times, only by giving a mental representation we are before known realities, even the sensations that are the most elementary forms of knowledge, are formalizations of reality, for example smell (pleasant, unpleasant), temperature (heat, cold), touch (rough, smooth), the sensations are usually much more elaborate and smell is related not only to the pleasant or unpleasant, the evocation that is created by being before some smells leads us back in a remembrance that makes the memory a reality, with the smells not only contextual, we also recognize. But even more, if we realize the sensations do not occur in isolation and when we touch we also feel a temperature and we are perceiving in contexts that give us information of the sensations we perceive, and the heat of the body can be the frightening cold of the dead, the warmth of children, the dangerous "fever" of the sick or being hot like the passions, and this does not depend only on the temperature, it also depends on the contexts in which we are perceiving, that is why in many occasions we do not resort to direct language to refer to the sensations.

The reality, as a construct that varies with time and with the passing of the years one ceases to be, although not completely, who one was, that is why symbols have different meanings, depending on who sees them; Since the individual is the one who formalizes reality according to his or her world of objects, we have to face different realities, since each person formalizes his or her reality according to the world that is being built, to the one that has been built, but in spite of being different, symbolic elements appear inside a culture that make us have a collective identity, which even though it is a constant construct, make us be similar? Yes! but not the same. When speaking of man as an object of study in anthropology, Dr. Santiago Genovés comments that definitions are of little use "since practically the most essential is usually indefinable, in addition to the fact

that we are men and women” (Genovés, 1993). What can account for us in a few words? What can account for us in many words? What can account for us? when the most essential escapes from objectivity and cannot be apprehended by being a product of experience, a product of sensations, which even the longest elucidation could never reflect, since a feeling only by sense exists, only by sense is it captured; becoming shared in terms of common experience, possibility of merging different cultures into categories and classifications by submitting them to specific mental forms of an epoch and a civilization by making them intelligible, as Lévi-Strauss (1981: p. 8) points out. Of course the experience of the other is communicable, what is not reproducible in accuracy is the experience, and nevertheless, the experience of the other is not impossible to be transmitted and understood and we could talk about sadness, joy, fear or amazement and we are sure that it would be understood, but we also know that it would be understood because we have all lived sadness, as well as joy, fear or amazement. “I stopped seeing them; after hearing them It is midnight. What can I do alone, now in the middle of the sea, and without the moon? I cry. I cry all the tears I have. I cry for everything I have not cried in my life. I cry, trying to hold myself back. To hell with it, I’m going to cry without fear and out of fear! How could I have gotten myself into this? Am I really crazy? Here I’m going to die of loneliness and fear. During the night several sharks have surrounded the raft. I cry. At dawn, without moving from the helm, without stopping crying, I calm down. Crying has done me good. It has focused me on the reason for the unreasonableness that my reason does not, will not, and cannot reach in this attempt where I do not know what to do” (Genovés, 1992). It would be impossible to quantify or measure this type of experience. It is even difficult to trap in linguistic constructs the man, who has his passions as essential (sadness, happiness, appetites, anxieties, fears, pleasures), if no one can assure that he is seeing exactly the same, much less be able to affirm that he is feeling the same, that is why it is said The beauty is in the eyes of the one who looks at it. “Now, if beauty exists or depends on a meaning, and the sense or significance of anything depends on our nature or certain acquired associations with the thing, the “beauty” of it is not a quality it really has, but only its possibility to become significant in some way for any of us... the experiences of the beautiful not only have to be significant, but sensibly significant” (Carritt, 1974: p. 30).

## 7. Conclusion

Identity is a state of reality, a construct we make of what we perceive. The category state gives account of the condition in which the perception of the environment is being interpreted, the self-perception; and the category construct expresses the sense of construction, creation, disposition, ordering.

We build ourselves on the basis of elements of collective identity through which we locate ourselves in a “we”, which is built on the recognition of *them*. This differentiation and self-location is circumstantial, since existence, as a set of

phenomena, manifests at the same time elements of the social references from which we formalize what we perceive.

In this melting pot that we are, both the elements of collective identity that homogenize interpretative and behavioral phenomena, and our concrete interests and particular needs, even those of our own biology, are manifested, so that social identity and personal identity are a necessary differentiation for analysis, but in the concrete phenomenon of construction of identity what exists is the subjectivity in which we find present the elements that allow us to give meaning to our own existence, coming from the society from where we take them and our own relative to our interests and needs. Both are not differentiated, but rather they manifest themselves structured in particular perceptions and interpretations, which are also collective; hence they are shared by human groups, because they come from similar educational processes from which we take the elements that allow us to formalize reality in a similar way. However, formalization as a phenomenon is particular.

The identity is an event and this happens in certain circumstances, so the responses we have to the phenomena are particular, manifesting a condition of existence is its constant flow. If the identity has as characteristic the construction from the circumstances in which it is made, it is because the life is a constant to flow and therefore the identity is a constant construction in the happening of the existence. The identity should not be interpreted as immovable, because it happens as a response to certain situations, so only the analysis of the interactions, based on the recognition of the elements that affect the interpretation made by the subject, is that we can understand the ways of acting from its logic.

This leads us to recognize that life is movement. Based on these reflections, we propose the following indicators for the analysis of the construction of identity:

1) *We see ourselves in the mirror that is We*. The image of the “we” is the idea that we have of ourselves and it is constructed, to a great extent, based on differentiation, so the self-location from the recognition of similar “we”, is given from the recognition of the “they”. This self-location starts from attributes, either self-qualified or in a group, that allow for membership in collectives. The attributes are fed back into the social contact, which is where they are confirmed or reconstructed, and are positive attributes from which those who are not included in the “we” are judged. The deviations in the behaviors corresponding to these attributes are justified when they are our own (we), above all the personal deviations judged by ourselves, but not when they are practiced by others, understood as they are, which is a reference of differentiation for the construction of the “we”.

2) *The idea that we have of ourselves*. We are producers and products of culture. Although we have elements of collective identity, we are also our own experience, so in addition to being social beings, we are particular beings. Thus, homogeneity is manifested through particularity, which presents itself through its own forms of expressing social being, what Bourdieu (1991) points out as

“homology”. This game of interaction between the social and the particular is merely methodological, necessary for the analysis, but the phenomena of identity are concrete; they are facts; they happen in the praxis of existence. In the idea that man has of himself, we find both social references, and samples of passions, tastes, fears, dreams, desires, needs, and all of these are also social matters; hence, although we are similar, we are not the same, since we are a sample of our own history.

3) *Identity is a constant process of change*. Since identity is a construction, it is permanently in a process of change since life is movement, and everything is in constant transformation. Identity is an event that happens and is expressed as a response to a given situation, so identity is a construct that is expressed in the face of constant change.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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