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MAKING SENSE OF IDENTITY DIALOGUES

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Abstract

In this commentary an alternative conceptual model of identity construction is proposed. In this model identity construction is seen as part of person's ongoing sense-making. Identity is perceived as subjective sense of continuity and sameness that renders one's being in the world meaningful. By drawing on empirical examples provided in target articles it is shown how this model, which is built around the notions of rupture, identity dialogues and strive towards meaningfulness, can be utilized to analyse identity dynamics in different space and time contexts. The importance of examining the links between individual's sense-making and collective meaning field, in which the personal sense-making is embedded, is also highlighted.

Keywords: identity, sense-making, meaningfulness, rupture, dialogue, otherness

In this commentary I reflect upon two studies of identity, by O'Sullivan-Lago and de Abreu (this volume) and by Ligorio (this volume). While being embedded in two different contexts, respectively in the context of immigration to Ireland and in the context of schooling in Italy, the two papers are similar in their emphasis on identity dynamics as these become evident in intra- and inter-individual dialogues. In this commentary, however, I want to move beyond the analysis of identity dialogues, and instead propose a general model of identity construction that allows seeing these dialogues as central, yet not as the only aspect in the functioning of this psychological phenomenon. In doing this, I will treat the studies discussed in the target articles as unique cases, through which the applicability of the general model to different thematic areas and space-time contexts can be demonstrated. My aim, then, is to continue the back and forth movement between data and general theoretical ideas that was started in the target articles in order to make a contribution to the advancement of identity theory.

Identity construction as sense-making

Sense-making is essential and fundamental quality of human being. That is, humans strive to make sense of their world and their being in the world; they strive to render their relation to the world and their experience within and of the world meaningful. In meaning-making, among others, a fuzzy category of self, which includes everything that is related to one's way of being, becomes created. The functioning of this fuzzy category is regulated by a superordinate subjective sense that represents self as being more or less same and continuous over time and space. This subjective sense of sameness and continuity connects diverse, even contradictory images of self, by

placing these in senseful relations to each other, and thus turns one's being in the world in its diversity and ever-newness meaningful. This subjective sense of continuity and sameness that renders one's being in the world meaningful will herein be referred to as sense of identity.

This perspective that links identity construction and sense-making is similar to the view advocated by the authors of the target articles. Similarly to their position, I conceptualize sense-making and identity construction as conscious use of signs in communication (see Salvatore & Venuleo, 2008 for a model of sense-making that emphasises affective/unconscious thought). Thus, when talking about identity construction I will refer to those more or less conscious externalized dialogues, where people are constructing meaning through dialogically engaging with different signs (voices, I-positions), and through which people become episodically aware of the meanings they hold about themselves and about their relation to the surrounding world.

According to this view, then, these dialogues are the arena, where person's unique lived-through experience becomes ordered and rendered meaningful. Various signs, that is person's and others' utterances, gestures, properties of the setting, available collective meaning potentials, and the myriad of signs from past and future evoked by the signs, which are available here-and-now, are gathered up and placed in a meaningful relation to each other through dialogue. Subjective sense of the situation and one's position in it emerges through this gathering up, which temporarily stabilizes the flow of one's experiences and the related flow of signs. The created subjective sense is thereafter distanced from the situation, where it originally emerged, and turned into generalized, trans-situational subjective sign, which can be integrated into person's intra-psychological system (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003). It becomes part of the fuzzy category of self, which is regulated through subjective sense of

sameness and continuity.

Two further characteristics of subjective signs need to be pointed out here. First, generalized subjective signs are hybrids of social and personal as sense-making is guided by the socially shared meaning potentials (Valsiner, 2007). Second, generalized subjective signs are future-oriented, they create a field of personal sense ahead of time, which guides future sense-making, while the future sense-making in turn re-produces the field over time in a circular movement (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2009, in press).

Rupturing otherness

As subjective sense of continuity and sameness, identity is relational. It becomes constructed in certain situations in relation to meaning fields, which are opened up by these situations. Importantly, identity as subjective sense, does not pre-exist its dialogical encounter with otherness, but instead becomes created within and through that encounter. Identity, then, is a generalized metasign that emerges from person's efforts to deal with a situation that creates a break in one's normal flow of being, by unwrapping a possibility to be otherwise (Murakami & Middleton, 2006). Rupturing life-event makes an other perspective visible in one's meaning field. It is a multifurcation point, which opens up different ways of being, different imagined future trajectories and asks the person to position oneself in relation to that emergent otherness. Rupture thus creates a possibility for dialogue between different viewpoints.

The idea that human thinking unfolds through miniscule disruptions in the flow of thought that trigger the dialogue between alternative meanings is suggested

more or less explicitly by scholars who emphasise the social and dialogical nature of mind (inter alia Billig, 1996; Gillespie, 2006; Valsiner, 2007). In relation to self and identity, Zittoun (2007) proposes to understand significant life-events, such as becoming a parent or having to leave one's homeland due to a war as breaks in one's normal flow of being, that create inner tension and push the person to re-configure one's self-system. I propose that also small-scale everyday events can under certain circumstances be perceived as ruptures that trigger the re-structuring of the self-system. The notion of rupture then acquires essential role in the conceptualization of identity.

Consider for example the case of Sarah from O'Sullivan-Lago and de Abreu's (this volume) study. The authors' analysis reveals that for Sarah an ordinary life-situation of going to a shop and hearing people talking in a foreign language becomes a trigger of her inner identity dialogues. She finds herself going back to that situation and trying to position herself as an Irish in relation to the foreigners and in relation to the wider group they represent. As the authors accurately point out, there is something about the wider social and cultural circumstances that make this ordinary life-event stand out from all the other times Sarah has gone to shop. The rupture on the level of culture becomes translated into a rupture on the individual level as the socially shared meanings are activated in individual's so guided sense-making (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2008). The psychological value that Sarah gives to this situation, her subjective sense of the situation (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2008) has thus changed: somehow it is not simply about meeting people with a different cultural background in the supermarket, but it is about Sarah's national identity in Ireland, where locals are outnumbered.

Ligorio's (this volume) case of the English teacher who discovers a learner in herself as a result of her activities in a computer lab and subsequent discussions about these activities with pupils, is another example of an everyday situation rupturing

one's normal flow of being, by opening up a possibility to be otherwise. In my interpretation the discussion between the teacher and pupils can be seen as a rupture, as a moment when the teacher's different way of being, her shift from being a teacher to being also a learner, suddenly becomes evident. The swapping of identities has taken place before, in the activity of the computer lab. Yet we can assume that this was an automatic reaction to a life-situation that the teacher invented there and then, without necessarily being aware of it. It is the dialogue with students that makes the otherness the teacher has taken on senseful. The teacher's reaction, "Eh this is it!", then, is the moment of realization, when she gathers up different signs that are related to that lived-through experience and when all that heterogeneity suddenly makes sense. The there-and-then reaction becomes generalized beyond that specific situation into abstract sense of being a learner (as well as a teacher). Again, I would suggest that this shift has been made possible by the specific contextual circumstances. Was the teacher faced with this otherness in her way of being in a different situation, perhaps in a context of collegial interaction, it might have evoked shame and wish to distance oneself from it, instead of incorporating this new subjective sense into her fuzzy category of self.

Identity dialogues – striving towards meaningfulness

Rupturing life-event then plays central role in identity construction as it makes an alternative perspective visible in one's meaning field and opens up a possibility to be otherwise. A useful way of conceptualizing the dialogues through which self takes a position in relation to otherness is offered by Dialogical Self theory (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992; Hermans, 2001). By drawing on this theory, the target

articles provide two contrasting examples of dealing with the emergent otherness.

On the one hand, O'Sullivan-Lago and de Abreu discuss strategies of re-establishing the self-continuity beyond a rupture. In their examples rupture is seen as a negative experience that needs to be overcome, and otherness is seen as something that needs to be placed in a comfortable distance from the self. Sarah's view of immigrants as hard-working and hence similar to her way of being, does not take a central position in her dialogues, but instead is suppressed by her other I-positions that favour the rejection of otherness. Ligorio, on the other hand, is concerned with the intertwinement of learning and identity. Her examples aim at showing how innovation of self emerges through contact with other, how otherness can be turned around as something attractive, and how self can be re-invented as the other through dialogical encounter. In short then, O'Sullivan-Lago and de Abreu discuss how identity dialogues restore self-continuity, while Ligorio talks about innovation of self through identity dialogues.

In my interpretation, while being different in their outcomes, the identity dialogues discussed in the target articles, serve the same purpose. O'Sullivan-Lago and de Abreu see identity dialogues as aiming to reduce and combat uncertainty. I would take a step further and propose to see sense-making as striving towards meaningfulness, which entails the reduction of uncertainty and ambiguity, and can be achieved equally successfully through productive engagement with or suppression of the alternative perspective. According to this view then, sense of identity, which is here understood as subjective sense of continuity and sameness, can be created through a representation of self as having changed (as in the case of English teacher), as well as through image of self as having stayed the same despite differing experiences (as in Sarah's case).

Why this meaning?

Finally, the presented juxtaposition of the two routes to meaningfulness in terms of their outcomes, i.e. restoration of self-continuity *vs.* innovation of self, opens up another interesting issue. The cases discussed by the authors provide examples of *how* different forms of identity dialogues occur. Additionally I want to suggest that also the question *why* these forms of identity dialogues occur is important. To rephrase, why did these forms of dialogue occur in those circumstances and why not others? What is it that enables us to productively engage with otherness in some contexts and reject it in other circumstances? Why did Sarah feel the need to distance her self from the perceived otherness, while the English teacher was ready to embrace it?

The answer to these questions, in my view, requires analysis of the collective meaning field in which these instances of personal sense-making are embedded. This analysis would need to move beyond investigating specific social representations (e.g. representations of immigration in O'Sullivan-Lago and de Abreu's case, and representations of learning and collaboration in Ligorio's case), and towards examining what constitute as barriers and promoters in the dialogical engagement with alternative representations (Gillespie, 2008). What I have in mind here is a generalized account of the workings of collective voices on explicit and tacit level as these guide personal sense-making. I believe that this kind of analysis would help us to unwrap, what is it that makes our striving for subjective sense of meaningfulness enabling in one context, while being constraining in another, and eventually can bring us closer to making sense of others' sense-making.

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