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IDENTITY AS HYPER-GENERALIZED PERSONAL SENSE

Abstract

In this paper I propose that as process of being identity is momentary, fluid and multiple, while simultaneously providing us with sense of sameness and continuity. Building on Valsiner's (1998; 2007) ideas about human sense-making I suggest, that we can reasonably deal with multiplicity/unity paradox, if we conceive this process of being as resulting in the construction of a fuzzy field of hyper-generalized personal sense, which ordinarily functions as an implicit and unspeakable background of our everyday functioning, while being constantly re-created through momentary instances of foregrounded and explicit identity-dialogues. I illustrate the ideas put forward in the paper by analysing a case of a young woman experiencing a change in her being. Finally, in an attempt to illustrate and further develop the presented ideas I introduce a metaphor of carpet-weaving as a well-fitting image for thinking about identity as process of multiple and fragmented, yet also united and same being.

Key Words: identity; sameness; sense-making; personal sense; rupture; dialogue; metaphor

How can personal identity be multiple and context-bound, while at the same time also providing us with sense of sameness and continuity? How can I conceive myself as moving and changing, behaving somewhat differently in every new situation I encounter, yet also feel that I am essentially the same person?

Since the constructionist ideas of Mead, Vygotsky and Wittgenstein, to name only the most frequently mentioned sources of inspiration, were taken up by contemporary social constructionists (Stam, 2002), the idea that identities are multiple and context-bound has become a norm in psychological theorizing (see for example Bhatia, 2002; Esgalhado, 2002; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). According to Stetsenko and Arievitch (1997): “The agent is defined through his or her involvement in the world, and both human mind and personality, self and agency, are defined as an activity, a way of being in concrete situations” (p. 160). Assuming that identity is strictly linked to self and agency, it follows that as a process of being, identity is constantly recreated in each new situation in individual's active engagement with social world. Although approached methodologically differently by social constructionists who focus on discursive practices (*inter alia* Edwards & Potter, 1992; Harré, 2002; Harré et al., 2009; Shi-xu, 2006; Shotter & Gergen, 1989), and socio-culturalists who look at co-construction of identities in joint actions (*inter alia* Edwards, 2005; Holland et al., 2001; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Rogoff, 1990), this idea is essential for both schools of thought (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 1997).

Nevertheless, our being in world is not simply multiple and momentary. Instead, identity has also something to do with unity, continuity and sameness. In Falmagne's (2004) words: “In some content-related sense I am constructed differently at [...] different moments. However, I remain myself, not you” (p. 835). In this paper, then, I return to the debate about the nature of identity from this perspective. In particular I suggest, that we can conceptualize identity as constantly reconstructed and multiple, yet simultaneously providing us with sense of sameness and continuity, if we conceive this process of being as resulting in the construction of a fuzzy field of hyper-generalized personal sense, which ordinarily functions as an implicit and unspeakable background

of our everyday functioning that is constantly recreated through momentary instances of foregrounded and explicit identity-dialogues (see also Andacht & Michel, 2005; Crossley, 2000). In proposing this I will draw upon Valsiner's (1998, 2007) theorizing about human sense-making.

Hyper-Generalization in Human Sense-Making

Valsiner's work departs from the ideas of Janet, Baldwin, Mead, Vygotsky, and those of German tradition of microgenesis and Aktualgenese (Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). According to this view, human functioning is dynamically intertwined with its socio-historical context, for person and context that are conceived as parts of the same integrated whole, become connected through reciprocal processes of internalization and externalization (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003). Through internalization social suggestions are transformed and integrated into individual's field of personal sense, and through externalization personal sense¹ is reflected back to the surrounding context, bringing along novelty and change (Valsiner, 2007). Through these bi-directional movements the context flows into self and self starts to inhabit the context; each becomes constructed and functions through the ongoing interaction with the other. Emergence of personal sense is thus "socio-culturally guided (as opposed to determined) and personally constructed at the same time" (Josephs, 2002, p. 163). Each moment of sense-making brings together person's reactions to the here-and-now experience, person's existing emotional and knowledge structures, available in personal sense field as created in person's life-history in anticipatory manner, and collective voices available in socio-cultural context (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003).

Central to Valsiner's theorizing about human sense-making is the idea that "once emerged, the signs continue to differentiate and become hierarchically integrated" (Valsiner, 2001, p. 86).

While our reactions to ever-new lived-through experiences in irreversible time are unique, they

¹ Herein I use Vygotsky's distinction between personal sense and collective meaning (Vygotsky, 1987; see also Valsiner, 2001, p. 89). Following Vygotsky, I conceive personal sense as dynamically intertwining cognitive and affective ways of relating to the world.

seem similar to some of our previous reactions (Sovran, 1992). Thus, in the process of sense-making, the here-and-now created and previously in anticipation constructed facets of personal sense are gathered up and placed in meaningful relations to each other (Murakami & Middleton, 2006). Through this gathering up subjective sense of the situation emerges (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2008), and as a bundle of inter-related facets of personal sense, becomes distanced from and generalized beyond the situation, where it originally emerged. In Valsiner's (2001) words: "Generalizability is the propensity of a sign to create an abstracted reflection upon that initial context" (p. 90). Having transformed into generalized and trans-situational form, it can be integrated into fuzzy field of personal sense, from where it can be taken up and used in sense-making under new circumstances (Abbey & Valsiner, 2004).

For Valsiner, the field of personal sense is thus hierarchically organized, with highly generalized metasigns auto-regulating (in the sense of spontaneous and automatic guiding) the ongoing sense-making. To emphasise this idea, the notion of 'promoter sign' is introduced: "The promoter role of these signs is a feed-forward function – they set up the range of possible meaning boundaries for the unforeseeable – yet anticipated – future experiences of the world. The person is constantly creating meaning ahead of the time when it might be needed" (Valsiner, 2005, p. 202). Our existing field of personal sense thus guides our ongoing functioning in the social world, by opening up a range of possible trajectories for our sense-making, while directing us away from others. That is, it does not determine our sense-making, but by being evoked ahead of its re-emergence makes the occurrence of certain reactions more likely than others.

I find Valsiner's (2001; 2007) ideas about generalization useful for thinking about identity. Especially interesting for me, is his claim that when personal sense becomes over or hyper-generalized, it also becomes unspeakable: "Speechlessness' – the propensity of human being not to say anything (to oneself or to another) can occur at both the lowest [...] and the highest [...] levels of semiotic mediation structure. [...] The person has overgeneralized the sign used in the mediational hierarchy to the level where speech turns into speechlessness" (Valsiner, 2001, p. 94,

original emphasis). In my reading then, if something has become very deeply embedded into our functioning and sense-making, then we cannot put it into words anymore; it is very powerful in guiding our everyday functioning in the world, yet it is intangible and implicit.

Valsiner has used the ideas about hyper-generalization mostly to think about the functioning of values in human lives (Valsiner, 2007; but see also Valsiner, 2002; 2005). In this paper I use these ideas to think about identity as being multiple and momentary, yet simultaneously giving us a sense of sameness and continuity.

Identity as Hyper-Generalized Personal Sense

Consequently, I suggest viewing identity as process of being that results in the construction of a fuzzy field of hyper-generalized personal sense. As a field of hyper-generalized sense it ordinarily functions as an implicit and unspeakable background of our everyday functioning. As a background, identity is constantly present, it is that aspect of our being that remains and feels the same, despite us continuously living through ever-new experiences. We cannot and usually do not need to talk about this invisible and taken-for-granted background, yet it constantly regulates our way of being as our new encounters with the world are made sense of in relation to it. It is conceptualized as a field, because it includes a wide range of interrelated personal 'senses' tied to different aspects of one's being, and it is fuzzy, because we cannot clearly define its perimeter and boundaries. As a field it is zoned, that is, it contains areas, which are more easily accessible (that is personal sense which is generalized, but not hyper-generalized), and others that are un-reachable through our verbalized self-reflection (see also Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003; Lewin, 1936).

Now, by bringing Valsiner's ideas about hyper-generalization, mostly used in relation to values, to the conceptualization of identity, do I render identity similar to values, such as justice or freedom? The idea that sense of morality and sense of identity are fundamentally interlinked, is

discussed elsewhere (Taylor, 1989; see also Brinkmann, 2008; Crossley, 2000). Here I suggest that the similarity between values and identity is clear, when the labels that psychologists have come to use to refer to these psychological phenomena are left aside, and a process-oriented approach is taken. Both values, which refer to our relation to others and to others relations to each other, and identity, which refers to our relation to ourselves and to others, are deeply embedded in our way of being and guide our functioning in the world in invisible yet essential way. Both are unspeakable; we can try verbalizing them, but words are always insufficient allowing us to capture only a fragment of what it really means to be 'me' or what it is like to have 'freedom'. Yet we always sense when an act goes against our values or when someone imposes on us an identity that we do not think to have. Thus, while being very different in their content, identity and values as far as they are conceived as hyper-generalized personal sense, emerge and function in a similar manner.

Nonetheless, if identity is this unspeakable background of sameness and continuity, then how can it be simultaneously multiple, momentary and constantly recreated? More precisely, what about those dialogues that we sometimes have with ourselves and with others about who we think we are and are not? Are these not multiple instances where our identity is explicitly expressed and talked about? This is where the conceptualization of identity that I propose here moves away from Valsiner's theorizing. In my attempt to deal with these possibly troubling questions I start by referring to Brinkmann's (2008) views on identity.

For Brinkmann, identity is self-interpretation. Building on Rosa's (2004) work, he distinguishes between two dimensions in self-interpretations, individual/societal and explicit/implicit, and thus yields a four-fold taxonomy of levels of self-interpretation. What is interesting in his taxonomy from the point of view of current discussion is this distinction between explicit self-interpretation, that he calls 'reflective self-image', and implicit self-interpretation, referred to as 'pre-reflective sense of self'. Brinkmann (2008) argues that "on neither the societal nor the individual levels can we reasonably talk about self-interpretation as a single, monolithic thing [...]. [There is no single] homogeneous pre-reflective sense of self" (p. 414). While I agree with his

denial of seeing identity as thing-like, I would argue that the implicit aspect of self-interpretation is sensed by individuals not necessarily as single and homogeneous, but still as meaningfully united. Besides, in my view this process of being that has become backgrounded and taken-for-granted is not pre-reflective, but rather over-reflective to the level of being out of reach through reflection. Yet I agree with Brinkmann that our being in the world on a more reflective level can only be conceived as multiple and fragmented. To explain this, I need to introduce the notion of rupture to my conceptualization of identity.

Rupturing Otherness: Foregrounding the Background

In our ordinary functioning then, we constantly construct personal sense of the world and ourselves within it. As Shotter and Lannamann (2002) remind us: “Our being and belonging arise from the condition of being embedded in an ongoing flow of spontaneous, reciprocally responsive, living activity, occurring between us and the other in the group. [...] We owe our being, our ontology, as the kind of persons we are, to our embedding within the ceaseless overall background of group activity” (p. 597). For Shotter then, our activity settings, while being historically and culturally situated, function as invisible backgrounds of our being. In this ceaseless and taken-for-granted flow we are called by others and othernesses around us to act in certain ways, to which we respond spontaneously, without noticing it (Shotter, 2003; 2008). In line with the thoughts here presented then, we function within the constraints and enablements of the activity contexts that we take for granted and do not notice, while through that engagement also creating personal sense of our being, that again guides our functioning in the world in an unnoticeable manner.

Yet in the context of our current discussion it is important to move beyond the description of this established relative equilibrium between person and context and instead ask, what about those moments when the callings of others suddenly stop making sense and cannot be responded

spontaneously? What happens to our backgrounded and unnoticed sense of personal identity in those moments when the callings of others create a break into our normal flow of functioning? To answer these questions I turn to Zittoun's theorizing about ruptures and transitions.

Zittoun (2007a) states: “The first criteria to consider an event as a significant rupture, is that it is subjectively, consciously or unconsciously perceived by a person as questioning her sense of self and sense of continuity” (p. 190). In my reading then, a rupture occurs when we sense that something in our being does not spontaneously flow anymore, but is temporarily stopped. This pre-reflective sense of breakage emerges in everyday experiences, when for example someone asks an immigrant, who has lived in her new homeland for several decades, when is she planning to go back home (that is, to her country of origin) (Bhatia, 2007). While it is possible, that these kinds of 'one-off' experiences create a serious rupture, it is more likely that they become noticed and generalized into a significant rupture on ontogenetic level only if they occur repeatedly and are gathered up as somehow similar instances in person's sense-making. Thus, the same experience can be seen as a rupture on microgenetic and as part of a life-changing interruption on ontogenetic level. For my discussion here, the microgenetic rupturing moments are central.

In the moments of rupture, then, our united and backgrounded sense of being becomes foregrounded and multiple. In Josephs's (2002) words: “The formerly taken-for-granted (and thus backgrounded) life-world suddenly becomes foregrounded and 'visible'” (p. 171). When we look at these moments of rupture we see no united sense of identity, but multiple situation-bound ways of defining our fuzzy sense of being. Yet these ways of defining ourselves that are reachable through reflection are related to the backgrounded sense of sameness and continuity; they come into being as a figure and ground (Guimarães & Simão, 2007), although capture only fragments of the background's entirety.

According to Zittoun (2007a), rupture is followed by a period of transition, which “aim to restore one's sense of continuity and integrity of self beyond the rupture” (p. 191). In my words, in transition, what was once backgrounded and was temporarily foregrounded, will become

backgrounded again. Rupture makes the callings of others that previously received a spontaneous response from us, noticed. What was before 'other as part of me' becomes a strange, unfitting otherness 'beside me'. The emergent otherness is questioning and demanding; it calls for our response, but we have no response at hand. We need to create a new response so that the otherness can again become 'part of my being' and 'I' can move beyond its rupturing potential.

The transition period can thus be conceived as a period of active dialogical engagements with oneself and others. Some aspects of our existing field of personal sense are brought into the here-and-now moment of reacting to the demanding other(ness). We bring different voices of others, that is imagined meaningful ways of focusing on one's life (Josephs, 2002), including our own past and imagined future voices, to these dialogical engagements. That is, not everything imagined in our inner reflections is considered ours, but instead through our ability to imagine, hold and recognize others' views in our field of sense, our inner deliberations take place in a multi-voiced space (Hermans, 1996; 2001; 2002; Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992). Personal sense of our being that becomes created through these dialogues, is thus distanced from the here-and-now experience, and integrated to our field of hyper-generalized personal sense, where it continues to guide our functioning in the world in implicit, yet significant manner. Importantly then, the field of personal sense is constantly feed by new personal senses. Thus it simultaneously shapes our everyday functioning in the world, and is shaped by it. It is this process, which allows us to sense ourselves as same and continuous across time and space contexts, while also being constantly recreated through multiple instances of explicit identity-dialogues.

Constructing Background through Foregrounded Identity-Dialogues: An Illustration

To illustrate the ideas discussed so far I will offer a brief analysis of an excerpt from a semi-

structured interview² I conducted in England in 2006 with a young Estonian woman, who I will call here Vera. At the time of the interview Vera had lived in England for eight months, having moved to the country to undertake her undergraduate studies. This interview was part of a larger semi-longitudinal multiple-case study carried out from autumn 2006 to autumn 2007 that explored issues of identity of young Estonians in the context of contemporary Britain.

MM: You said earlier that being at home in the winter, you felt to have changed. In what sense did you feel you had changed?

Vera: I think I've changed quite a lot. I've always been pretty conservative in everything, in behaviour and everything. When I came here, I started to... All these people that surround you, they take things very easily... If there is a party, then there is a party, if we drink, then we drink, that kind of things... And I feel I've started to take things more easily too. I'm not sure yet, if it is right or wrong. Sometimes I feel guilty. How come? Before I would never have partied like this nor done all these other things. But now it's like, I don't know... Sometimes I don't know what's happening to me... My friend, who came to visit me from Estonia, she said too: 'Oh wow, you have changed so much!' Not that we can't talk anymore or something, all that is the same, we can sit and chat and everything. But she says I take things... That I am not so conservative anymore. She hasn't said whether it's good or bad. For her, she is crazy about partying, so for her it's like: 'Great! Now we can party together.' So she's happy about it. [...]

MM: So why do you feel guilty?

Vera: Sometimes... My mother has always been against me going to parties, or if she would find out that I have tried here, I don't know, cigarettes or alcohol, she would... So I have this doubt and initially I didn't want to. But here it is somehow, I take things more easily.

² The interview was conducted in Estonian, voice-recorded, transcribed verbatim and then translated to English by the author. I have tried to maintain the 'feel' of Vera's talk, while somewhat smoothing her use of language in the process of translation.

Foregrounding the Background: Ruptures in Vera's Being. In my view, Vera's talk reveals several instances of foregrounding. Importantly, as an interviewer I have created a rupture into Vera's normal flow of functioning by asking her to reflect upon her experiences. I have thus asked her to foreground some aspects of her being, bring some of her taken-for-granted process of being to our jointly created field of communication. Our dialogue is thus an unfolding transition, where Vera is working through the rupture. In fact, when reading the excerpt, one can sense that it is not easy for Vera to talk about her flowing process of being: she pauses often, tries to find better ways of formulating her ideas and jumps from one thought to another. For me, this somewhat hesitant way of talking indicates that the ideas are created here-and-now as some facets of the backgrounded sense of identity are brought to the forefront. Thus, Vera is not re-presenting here a previously constructed image of herself, but instead she is gathering up instances of her being here and now.

Additionally, there are traces of other previously occurred ruptures in Vera's talk. One possible way of analysing Vera's self-reflection would be to refer to the rupture caused by her move to a foreign country. These kind of major life-changing events are in the focus of Zittoun's (2007a; 2007b) and Becker's (1999) theorizing. Instead, I propose that Vera's move abroad as such is not yet a rupture, but it becomes one only if Vera gathers up and makes sense of her diverse, yet somehow similar miniscule instances of being different as caused by the event of migration. From this perspective then, the event of going to a party, trying cigarettes and alcohol, talking to the friend and to the mother, as referred to by Vera, function as ruptures that make her aware of an other possible way of being. Also, Vera refers to the movement between home and abroad as bringing the questions about her way of being into her consciousness. Thus, as discussed above, our being is interlinked with our socio-cultural context, where we have found a way to respond to the callings of others. As Vera's case indicates, these ways of being that have become spontaneous and faded to the background, are interrupted and foregrounded in a new context until we find an other way of responding to the callings again.

Dialogues of Becoming. Looking at Vera's quotation, we can observe several parallel dialogues that are brought to the moment of our interview from different space and time contexts. Vera is in dialogue with me, and is thus talking to an imagined fellow Estonian, imaging other woman, but also to an imagined researcher in an imagined research interview context. She is also arguing with her own past self who acts like a concerned observer of Vera's present self. Additionally, the dialogue with Vera's Estonian friend and her past discussions with her mother are surfaced in her ongoing conversation with me. Finally, Vera's friends from England, '*these people that surround you*', appear in her narrative. We see Vera fluctuating between these perspectives, temporarily taking their position and endowing these with a voice, and through that fluctuation constructing a sense of her being (Hermans, 2002).

Yet the explicit dialogue with different others is only one level where the perspective of the other is present in Vera's self-dialogues. The otherness appears also on a more fundamental level. That is, other is present in every personal sense as an other perspective in relation to which the sense is made. Self/other perspectives are thus complementary and inter-dependent as inside and outside of a circle. Every utterance is simultaneously an affirmation and negation: the listener is pushed towards one meaning and pulled away from another (Billig, 1996). Importantly, taking one position does not completely silence the opposite, but the other remains in the field of sense in a passive form and can be re-activated when circumstances change (Abbey, 2007). As Bakhtin (1986) has suggested: "Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival" (p. 170).

In Vera's talk, then, the utterance: '*I've always been pretty conservative*' builds up certain contrasts: the temporal dimension 'always' has a meaning in relation to concepts such as 'never' or 'now'; Vera's self-description 'pretty conservative' emerges in contrast to 'not conservative' or 'very conservative'. Vera's later discussion indicates that the initial possible contrasts, 'pretty ↔ very' or 'never ↔ always' are, indeed, wrong and I should think of her as 'now being not conservative'. Yet that meaning is created through an oppositional image, without which the desired picture cannot emerge. The 'then-existed conservativeness' functions as a background in relation to

which the figure of a new 'non-conservative Vera' is created, leaving open the possibility for the ground to become the figure in some undetermined future situation.

Turning Foreground into Background. According to views presented here, identity-dialogues function as ways of working through a rupture. They are sites of gathering up different facets of personal sense and collective meanings, through which the here-and-now reaction becomes generalized beyond its instance of occurrence. In my view Vera achieves this distancing by using the idea of personal change. By constructing a sense of herself as a person who has changed Vera gathers up her heterogeneous experiences, feelings and thoughts about herself and about others, and stabilizes this bundle temporarily to state who she is. That way Vera constructs for herself a sense of identity, which links her past, present and future together in a meaningful way (Crossley, 2000). All the different voices are combined here. The 'past conservative self' is not silenced and abandoned, but positioned in relation to the 'new easy-taking self'. The feelings of guilt, confusion, but also excitement and joy of being different are tied together meaningfully. The antagonistic voices of Vera's friends and mother are placed in relation to each other and can thus co-exist. This temporary stabilization, this foregrounded sense of sameness and continuity, presented to me as a story of change, enables Vera to move on into the unpredictable future, where this aspect of her current being is part of her normal flow of functioning. What is here foregrounded is thus ready to become backgrounded again. We do not see here, how it turns into invisible background, yet we see how the movement into background is set to motion. Importantly though, this fluctuation between background and foreground is open-ended and unfinished. In Holland's words: "Identities – if they are alive, if they are being lived – are unfinished and in process" (Holland et al., 2001, p. vii).

Weaving One's Life-Carpet

In this final part of the paper I bring the discussed ideas together by introducing a metaphor. I invite the reader to think about identity as process of being in the world by imagining it as the activity of carpet-weaving (J. Valsiner, personal communication, 10 May, 2008). By introducing this metaphor, on the one hand, I give the reader another way of engaging with the presented ideas, while on the other hand, take myself a different stance towards this conceptualization and see how it could be developed further.

Before explaining how I see this metaphor fitting with the current discussion, I touch upon the assumptions that lie behind its usage. First, carpet weaving is an activity; hence, we are interested here in the process; we want to understand how carpet gets woven, not how it is going to look like. Second, the carpet gets woven by someone. The single acts of weaving have a common referent; that is, the subject as “an ontologically permanent site” (Falmagne, 2004, p. 834), is actively engaged in the process of weaving. Third, although the activity of weaving is usually an individual activity, the weaver is not separated from the wider world. Instead, the practice of carpet-weaving has developed historically; it is an accumulation of the collective knowledge available in a certain socio-cultural context. The looms, the yarn, the patterns, the specific movements of the weaver are all historically, socially and culturally situated, and though she may not realize it, the weaver is building on this collective knowledge when producing one’s carpet.

A carpet becomes woven by using parallel and multiple threads of yarn, which become knotted together by a weaver (who possibly uses looms). In this metaphor, the threads of yarn can represent different facets of personal sense, which bring together the personal experience of reacting to different life-events. All these threads are loose and can be taken up and tied together at any given moment of time in any given way, although most often the weaver is following a pattern in her production. Most of the time the weaving continues automatically, without the weaver needing to think about the movements she makes; even the usage of pattern and colours becomes part of weavers non-reflective actions. Yet in some moments, an interruption occurs, perhaps someone addresses the weaver with a question, and the automatic activity of weaving breaks up. In order to

continue the weaver has to take a moment and think, where did she stop and decide how to go on. Most often she would continue with the same pattern, yet in principle it is possible that after this momentary deliberation, she could also choose to change some colours in the existing pattern or introduce a completely new pattern to one's carpet. One way or another, she will come back to her work and continue in an automatic manner until another interruption makes her to stop.

Now imagine that the weaver will never finish this carpet, but she will weave it as long as she lives. Also, imagine it being enormous, so large that the edges of the carpet are not visible, but it covers everything that we can see. By taking a very close look at the carpet, by squeezing our nose against its surface we can see nothing but separate knots, each slightly different in their colour, size and manner of knotting. Yet when we take a step back, look at the weaver's production from a distance, we can see that there is some regularity, some pattern emerging from tying together the unique knots. This possibility to zoom in and out, to foreground and background, while looking at the same activity is the reason why I find the carpet-weaving metaphor suitable for illustrating identity as process of being, which is simultaneously united and multiple.

From Metaphor to Theory-Building

As stated earlier, I introduced this metaphor to see, whether mapping my abstract ideas on to something that is more familiar would open up new ways of thinking about identity. I will finish this paper by pointing out one possibility for developing the proposed ideas, and leave the reader to find other ways of extending the offered conceptualization through the use of carpet-weaving metaphor.

Using this metaphor then, we could ask whether the activity of weaving involves only the tools that were mentioned above or whether weavers use other tools in carpet production. We are most likely to find that weavers use many different tools, among which are scissors that they use to

cut off some loose yarn ends, but which they might also use to destroy their own production. Taking this idea to the conceptualization of identity then, can we reasonably argue that identity as process of being in the world also involves regression and self-destruction, or is it solely a progressive and constructive process (P. Jesus, personal communication, 17 May, 2009)? How can we reasonably think about self-destruction using the framework discussed above?

Let us assume that self-destruction is a process of being where a person, instead of building mutually rewarding relationships with others, engages in activities that are harmful to oneself and potentially to others. Being an alcoholic thus seems to count as being self-destructive. Using the discussed ideas we could then imagine alcohol to function as scissors that cut up a person's efforts to weave together sober experiences in the world in a positive manner, while allowing experiences of drunkenness become part of the field of hyper-generalized personal sense. Thus we could develop the proposed model further by including the idea of semantic blocks or barriers (Gillespie, 2008) into our conceptualization.

Now where do these semiotic blocks come from? As the example of an alcoholic indicates, they can be voluntarily taken up by the individual from the collective sphere and integrated into one's field of personal sense. In other cases they need to be purposefully introduced to a person's field of experience by someone else who helps turning these into aspects of personal sense field. Imagine for example a woman in an abusive relationship. She is not able to break free from this way of being, that has become ordinary for her, without the help from someone else, who hands her the tools, the scissors, with the help of which to cut open the existing carpet of being and build up semiotic barriers that allow her to construct a different, more enabling way of being.

This latter example brings us very close to Vygotsky's (1978) theorizing about the emergence of higher psychological functions. We could thus ask, how can we reasonably talk about the emergence of identity in child's development using the discussed ideas? The answer to this and other similar questions is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet I hope that ideas presented here can function as useful stepping stones for future theoretical explorations.

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