Beyond Categorization: Addressing Social Identity as Culture and Context

When we are asked to describe "who we are," we often cannot help but include social and cultural categories. Of course, we seldom think about the categories themselves and instead simply list the attributes that we believe define us as individuals, our identity.

I might list the following characteristics or social groups: *introvert, patient, critical, only child, conscientious objector, father, husband, son, German, immigrant, white, middle class, on the boundary of the boomer and X generation, male, no fan of soccer, fan of the color purple, etc. Some of these labels refer to my social identity*, i.e., my belonging to and membership in specific groups.

These social groups are neither fixed or firm. They and their relevance shift with the respective context in which one interacts and are subject to the perspectives and interpretation of others. For example, my immigrant experience links me closer to people of vastly different nationalities and upbringing. We share the experience of adapting to a specific cultural environment, namely that of the United States. In contrast, my wife's experience is distinct from mine as a white male. Though she is also an immigrant (born and raised for her first eleven years in India before spending her teenage years in Jamaica, West Indies), she has been subjected to a level of suspicion and surveillance by overzealous sales associates that I have never experienced when walking into a U.S. clothing store.

These examples illustrate how we identify with social groups that are recognized within our social surroundings. In the fields of social psychology and sociology, the concepts of social identity and social identity groups have served to understand inter- and intra-group conflict. Specifically, they are used to explain:

- How different frames of reference and perspectives among individuals and groups develop
- How people interact and experience interactions as representatives of groups or sub-groups
- The concept of *identity* from a social perspective

In the context of Diversity & Inclusion discussions and initiatives in many Western organizations, these concepts demarcate the supposed identities of the workforce to illuminate differing frames of reference and experiences, frequently with the intent to

address real and perceived inequities that reflect those of the larger society. Hence, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, ability, generational, and other labels readily categorize the social identities of individuals. In many organizations, employee networks have been created around these categories to voice and explore the collective experience of a given group or sub-group.

While meaningful at first glance, closer scrutiny may reveal such categorization as simplistic and insufficient to attain its objectives: enabling relevant understanding of differences, improving the inter- and intra-group relationships, and ensuring equitable standards and opportunities. After all, how is one to determine which parts of one's identity are more or less relevant? Should my wife become active in the women's or Asian network?

What makes such categorization simplistic is their reliance on the specific societal context that makes these categorizations meaningful. In a rapidly diversifying and globalizing context, social identities shift, becoming much more fluid and revealing surprising nuances. One such distinction is that others frequently ascribe specific identities to us – some of which we may be entirely unaware – based on our real or perceived affiliation with a specific group of people. During fieldwork in Mexico, I was a *gringo*. In a Yucatec Maya village, I became a *Mexican*. In India, I am a sahib. In my native Germany, I am quickly recognized as a *Rheinländer* and, among *Rheinländers*, I am from the lower part left of the river Rhine. Among people from the Caribbean, my wife is a *big island* person, while as an Indian in Jamaica, she and her family are frequently placed within a

specific social context created by the century-old British importation of Indians as part of the colonial history. In the United States, my wife is frequently approached by immigrants from Central America in Spanish. Her physical features seem to induce the assumption that she speaks Spanish and shares cultural characteristics.

These instances also illustrate how parts of our identity are readily claimed by us in categories relevant within our social contexts, while others are ascribed to us by others based on their own categories, which may be entirely surprising and unfamiliar to us. The distinction between claimed and ascribed identities is an important addition in the prevailing thinking on social identity and social identity groups. It adds an increasingly important layer of understanding to how we frame identity discussions in the workplace.

An example from a recent workshop on this topic illustrates this point well: An African-American female who had spent a few years as an expatriate in India as part of an acquisition integration team described how, when growing up in the southern United States, she had embraced belonging to the Black community and its historic experience of discrimination, oppression, and social marginalization at the hands of the White population. She vividly recounted numerous situations in which she personally experienced strong bias and disadvantage and overcame significant social barriers created by the racially demarcated boundaries in U.S. society. Her assignment to India gave her a very different perspective on her identity. There, she was treated with hostility, for she represented the dominant U.S.-American acquirer.

She discovered her own difficulties of being ascribed the category of a U.S.-American and the attributes of social power and privilege that are part of the acquisition experience. She experienced a powerful lesson that compelled her to shift her understanding of social identity to be more fluid and context-dependent.

Arguably, it is important to understand the social experiences that are created due to social boundaries, which define groups and sub-groups as well as the experiences of individual members. The fluidity of such identity boundaries and their dependence on context gains relevance with the acceleration of globalization and the diversification of the workforce.

How can we encourage a meaningful exploration of our social identity that reconciles both aspects and enables a relevant understanding of our experience in interactions with others? TMC has found some interesting answers to this question in our work with many global organizations. In assisting these organizations in their pursuit of the three Diversity & Inclusion goals (i.e., enabling relevant understanding of differences, improving the inter- and intra-group relationships within the workforce, and ensuring equitable standards and opportunities) and advancing existing Diversity & Inclusion approaches, we have learned that:

1. It is helpful to "deconstruct" categories and the associated *experiences* of difference. Since each category exists within a specific social context, it is useful to uncover that context. For example, the category of gender will have specific expressions in workplaces determined by the situations and context within which they occur. This context also determines how differences are experienced and interpreted. This type of exploration helps expose categories as a sort of "shorthand" for deeper layers of assumptions of similarity or difference as well as subjective experiences and perceptions. Thus, different perceptions of gender in the workplace are frequently associated with assumptions and perceptions of assertiveness and the specific behavior patterns, expressions, and situations through which the impression of assertiveness or lack thereof is constructed.

2. Understanding social identity groups from a cultural perspective assists in this deconstruction. After all, expectations, assumptions, behaviors and practices, and the respective perceptions that developed as a defining group characteristic within specific social and historical contexts are largely learned. Differences with a biological component are frequently mediated by culture. Such perspective also enables individuals to position themselves within the inevitable normal distribution of characteristics within a given group and reconcile simultaneous influences of social identities and social identity groups that affect specific behavior.

3. Actualizing the above points requires a more sophisticated exploration of differences in the workplace and the willingness to engage in nonjudgmental dialogue. Such dialogue needs to go well beyond validating the existence of claimed or ascribed social identity groups. It also needs to further the mutual understanding of respective frames of reference (sometimes also called *identity frames*) and lead to reconciliation and mutual adaptation of assumptions, behaviors, and practices.

As the personal examples illustrate, the forces that shaped the behaviors, beliefs, and perceptions of others are increasingly complex in our global context. Any local categories for explaining them are likely to be limited and limiting. TMC's Cultural Orientations Approach™ is configured to be an essential catalyst to apply these lessons in the diversifying workplaces of the 21st century.

Bibliography

Cote, J. E., & Levine, C. G. (2002). *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis* (illustrated edition.). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hogg, M. A., & Terry, D. J. (2000). Social Identity and Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts. *The Academy of Management Review,* 25(1), 121-140.

Hogg, M. A., Terry, D. J., & White, K. M. (1995). A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly,* 58(4), 255-269.