A brief introduction to thinking about identity in the 21st century

The Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life

As an in-house 'think-tank', the Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life is inspired by Sodexo's deeply held conviction that improving Quality of Life leads to the progress of individuals and contributes to the performance of organisations. Its role is to gather and develop insight to help Sodexo understand better what are the levers of Quality of Life.

About this report

Today, our identities seem to be more varied and complex than ever before and we need to navigate them on a daily basis. That's why, in March 2017, the Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life convened a round-table with academic experts from University College London Anthropology to deconstruct the concept of 'identity' and explore how it consists of multiple intersecting vectors that may or may not inform one another. Founded on this conversation, the purpose of this report is to serve as a guide for thinking about the dynamic and complex nature of our identities and develop a more comfortable approach to navigating multiple components.

The participants of the round-table were:

University College London

Dr. Susie Kilshaw

Prof. Ruth Mandel

Prof. Daniel Miller

Prof. Sandra Wallman

Sodexo

Dr. Rohini Anand, SVP Corporate Responsibility & Global Chief Diversity Officer

Daphne Carthy, Researcher, Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life

Thomas Jelley, VP, Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life

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Background

The Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life is founded on the conviction that improving quality of life leads to the progress of individuals and contributes to the performance of organisations. At Sodexo, we employ over 425,000 people and value the diversity of our identities in relation to age, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and the many other aspects of our identity that make each one of us unique. We also serve millions of people at different moments of their daily life and at different times in their life. As such, the Institute's research often looks at a wide range of individuals in varying life situations including children, parents, spouses and partners, workers, carers, patients and older adults among many. Aspects of *identity* arise on a regular basis, for example:

- when exploring the psychological wellbeing of those who work away from home – notably off-shore oil and gas workers, military personnel – we identified that a source of stress is their continuing role as parent, spouse, or partner, mediated by modern communication technology *despite being physically distant*

- when we considered personal interaction and services in an online world, we found that the essence of service includes the notion of identity: part of our self-identity is shaped by the services we have access to and the way they are delivered through our purchasing power, membership of a certain group, or privilege. Indeed, as the form of service delivery changes, there may be impacts on the sense of 'self' created through the delivery. Consider changes that can occur when personal interaction in a service moves online: some elements of tone of voice and civility may be lost but ease of navigation, more personalised information and the aesthetic appeal of a customisable graphic user interface may be gained. Each of these elements may have an impact on a consumer's perception of a service provider's estimation of them, and therefore an impact on their own sense of identity

- in our research on healthcare and seniors' care, a recurring theme has been the importance of recognising and valuing not only the clinical *patient* but also the individual, *a person* who brings their identity in all its rich complexity with them and whose response to treatment / care may vary according to elements of their identity

The purpose of this brief introduction to thinking about identity in the 21st century is to set out some of the helpful frameworks and models that can be used to navigate identity; a topic that each of us is instinctively drawn to at some level and which, approached with care, can teach us much that is valuable and useful about ourselves and each other. Approached with ignorance, indifference or worse, identity can also be exploited in ways that are divisive and detrimental to quality of life.

What follows is inspired by and based on discussions with experts in the field of anthropology from University College London[1]. We start by considering the difference between 'identity' and 'identification' and how individuals can experience varying degrees of freedom in relation to their identity. We then appreciate identity's role as a resource and the collective dimension of identity before demystifying myths in relation to identity, the online world and social media.

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Identity and identification

Identity can be characterised as being about the self, something internal to each of us, that determines how different roles in life (e.g., child, parent, spouse, partner, worker, carer, friend) are performed – hence the idea that we have multiple identities. By contrast, the process of identification is external; it is carried out by an observer, often in a position of power or authority, who often focuses on one aspect of identity such as gender, race or religion.

Individuals have multiple identities that come to the fore or recede depending on context. Thinking about identity requires us to consider which facet of identity is in the spotlight in a particular context. Identity and identification both depend on context and tension can emerge when there is a mismatch between *felt identity* and *observed identification*.

For example, a person may be born, raised and live in a particular country, feel they are from that country, but be seen as foreign because of the genetically inherited colour of their skin. Equally, a person may feel they are foreign because they were born and raised elsewhere, and yet be seen as from the country because their parents emigrated from it. Another example is the frequent media emphasis on the *gender* of women rather than what they have achieved.
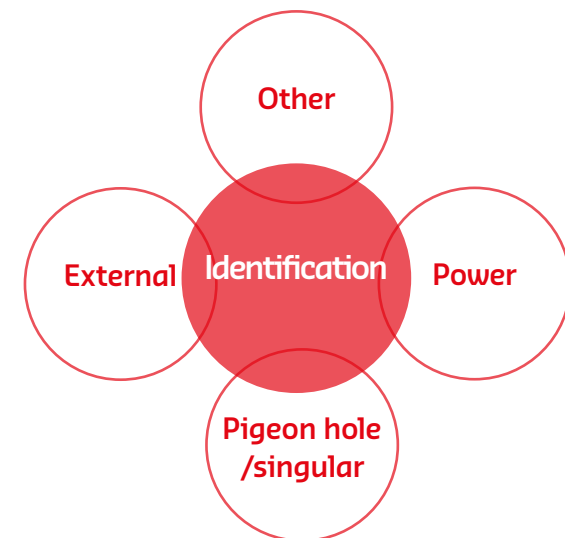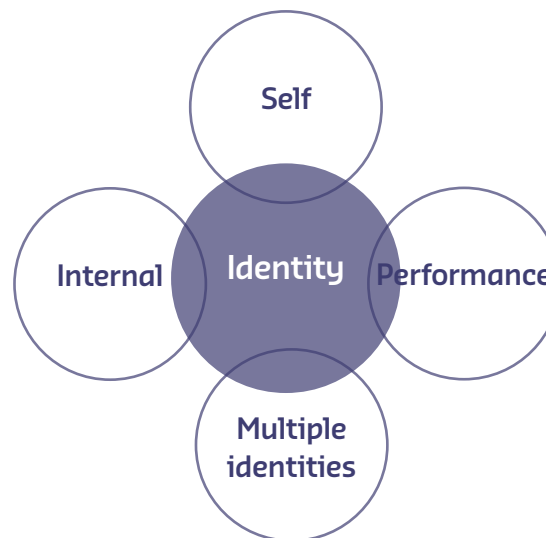
Identity and autonomy

To many people, multiple individual identities are a fact of life and easy to speak of. However, not everyone has the same freedom to pursue and express multiple identities and, among those who have such freedom, some struggle to derive sense and meaning. Accordingly, it can be useful to consider at which stage of an identity continuum individuals find themselves:

1. the 'ego' has identities that are well defined (or 'boxed-in') by tradition, religion or culture. Its rights, responsibilities, privileges and expectations are clear. Margins for manoeuvre are limited but certainties afford structure and predictability (see Figure 1)

2. the liberated 'ego' has the freedom to explore and choose among many different identities without imposition or restriction (see Figure 2)

3. the bewildered 'ego' experiences the freedom to explore and choose among many different identities without imposition or restriction as overwhelming. This 'ego' struggles to feel 'grounded' in a meaningful sense of identity. The 'ego' may be vulnerable to extreme influences that claim to offer a strong sense of identity (see Figure 3)

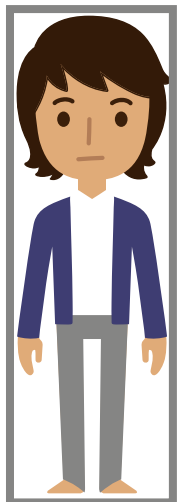The 'ego' may be vulnerable to extreme influences that claim to offer a strong sense of identity

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

The life satisfaction question is about subjective wellbeing in which a significant factor is to what extent the individual is able to satisfy aspirations with the resources available to them

Identity as resource

In the evaluation of quality of life, an approach that is often used is to ask individuals how satisfied they are with their life overall. This life satisfaction question is essentially about subjective wellbeing in which a significant factor is to what extent the individual is *able* to satisfy aspirations with the resources available to them. Consider the following in relation to identity:

(a) we often think of resources in terms of what we *possess*. However, along with time and information, our very identity - such as belonging to a certain group – can be an intangible resource that brings access to material resources. For example, in some welfare systems, parents benefit from particular treatment

(b) following (a) above, the same aspect of identity can be a liability or neutral in different contexts. For example, some parents can feel conflicted between their caring responsibilities and their work activity or at a disadvantage

(c) identity is an intangible resource that can be converted into other types of resource e.g. social or material depending on the context. For example, being a parent can afford access to dedicated local community or online groups

Identity, the online world and social media

Just as 'offline' is easily equated with 'real' and 'online' equated with 'virtual', so identity can be thought of as genuine 'offline' and somehow immaterial or fake 'online'. However, the academic research suggests this dualism is simplistic and unhelpful because the ways in which our identities interact with and straddle technological platforms are far more complex and, as always, context dependent.

Divorced from the seemingly inescapable reality of our physical self, some hailed the internet as a source of anonymity, flexibility and freedom in relation to identity. However, within just a couple of decades, many people now consider the internet is far from being a bastion of privacy

in which individuals can freely express identities without offline consequences. To others, for example those whose physical lives are very regimented e.g. in factory work, the online world is the *only* place where it is possible to explore and express individual identity, such as by joining an interest group or a fantasy community.

Academic research has found social media to reinforce offline trends and norms in relation to identity roles. For example, people see images of gendered roles e.g. in parenting and socialising, then represent themselves in ways that show consistency with the portrayal, and in so doing reinforce the trend or norm.

The relative importance of online and offline identities, the extent to which they are perceived as real or virtual by individuals, and which aspects of identity are at play, depends on context. There is no single sense of direction that informs how identity is affected by the offline / online nature of the environment in which it is expressed. Instead, there is huge diversity worldwide.

Conclusion

This brief introduction to thinking about identity in the 21st century has set out a number of frameworks and models that can help us to think about identity so as to avoid the pitfalls of over-simplification. They range from the straightforward but fundamental difference between identity and identification, to the rejection of offline versus online dualism in relation to identity in favour of complexity. Whether an aspect of identity is experienced as a resource that is an asset or a liability, whether freedom and autonomy are grounding or bewildering, the importance of context cannot be underestimated.

QualityofLifeInstitute@sodexo.com

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