How deep is the Mud? It depends on who you ask:
What makes me different from you?

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Final Reflection and Integrative Essay
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Abstract

How Deep is the Mud is used as a metaphor to ask the big question, why am I a unique

individual, what makes me different from you? To reflect on an answer to this question, a broad

poll of classroom, professional and life experience is synthesized with a review of current

academic theories and philosophies. Current definitions of an individual are developed from the

outside, based on manifest traits and behaviours that provide broad definitions. In reflecting on

the big question, I sense there are deeper, inside, elements that drive the external manifestations

that are labeled and classified today. These deeper inside elements are unique to an individual at

a very basic level. The central point of this reflection is to develop a view to understanding an

individual from the inside out at a basic level that can assist in answering the big question.

Looking at elements of language, communication, socialization, and storytelling, a perspective of

a unique individual is proposed. The interactions and interconnectedness of the individual "I"

and individuals "We" are discussed to further inform the reflection on how these relations

contribute to a unique individual worldview.

Key Words: individual, individuals, identity, behaviours, traits, language, communication,
              socialization, storytelling, complex systems

How deep is the mud? It depends on who you ask.

How deep is the mud? It depends on who you ask. This metaphor can be representative of how different people in the same situation may experience it differently. The question that this raises for me is, why do people experience the same situation differently? This, of course, is a fundamental question if you subscribe to the belief that people do indeed experience the same situation differently. This 'big question' is not new. A big question can be defined as one that is straightforward and relevant and of interest to the general population that has been insistently asked over time by philosophers because the answer is germane to how we live (J.D.Mayer, 2007). The variations on why people are different from one another- mind versus body, the identity question (who am I?), the science of personality (our familiarity with an individual), and the study of personality (how does the individual change or not change), have a broad and growing research database that can be accessed to begin to answer the big question.

Theophrastus (372 – 287 BC; 1902), a Greek philosopher, asked the same big question that we are still concerned with over 2,400 years later:

> "Many a time ere now I have stopped to think and wonder, — I fancy the marvel will never grow less, — why it is that we Greeks are not all one in character, for we have the same climate throughout the country, and our people enjoy the same education."

My curiosity as to the potential answers to the big question continues to have me reflect on the individuals around me and what makes me different from them. Theophrastus (372 - 287 BC; 1902) in his book *Characters*, identified thirty outlines of moral types, which form a picture of human nature. This is perhaps the first record of systematically defining and classifying individuals. Today, I need to go no further than my home to reflect on the big question Theophrastus raised 2,400 years earlier. Having twenty-year-old twin daughters and a twenty-two-year-old son, who all grew up with the same love, care, and access to the same resources and

environment, yet all have different perspectives on life situations, which provides me with contemporary examples of Theophrastus' big question every day. In my life experiences, I often wonder how people choose to define me as an individual, by my family, by my job, by my professional associations, by my academics or a combination of all determined by the context I am interacting in or some other deeper elements that are at play?

This early work by Theophrastus underpins a study of personality that begins to look for shared and general behaviours to classify individuals using objective knowledge based on data that can be categorized, referred to as nomothetic statements or laws (Good, 2006). Hippocrates is associated with nomothetic theories and defined the four humours: yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, and blood with two dimensions (hot and cold, and dry and wet) on which all people could be placed, which today may be referred to as traits (as cited in Good, 2006). Nomothetic definitions are related to the general properties of our reality versus idiographic definitions that are related to our unique properties (Windelband, 1894; 1998). Idiographic views focus on uniqueness and subjective experiences, promoting a deeper understanding of the individual or what is unique or particular to any single individual (Runyan, 1983; Windelband 1894; 1998). Carl Rogers' (1945) use of the Q-Sort or non-directive client methodology is an example of idiographic views in practice.

The tendency to develop theories, labels, laws and general descriptions of individuals as part of a homogeneous and systematic classification scheme to simplify the study of an individual versus a deeper understanding of a unique individual at a very basic level is re-enforced through the nomothetic approaches. The effect of the nomothetic approach may be the elimination of an individual as an "outlier" only to make a label fit and losing that deeper insight that may inform a unique worldview. Paradoxically, the root of the word individual, "individua"

was at one point regarded as unclear and only had real significance in the development of academics and use of the word at a higher level (Elias, 1991). This may have been related to the communal nature of society in early development versus an individualistic view in many societies today.

Experiments in social psychology can sometimes be considered flawed because researchers do not include a social lens and set up research questions in the constructs of their cultural community (Sherif, 1936). As an example, I observe in readings on conflict interventions and aid efforts, that culture is often equated to a country as a homogenous label that fits well for defining a scope or service area. While countries play a significant role in establishing the global community, countries have come and gone, been renamed and borders re-aligned while culture has been enduring and is not defined by borders; instead, culture continues to be determined by particular customs, symbols, rituals, and practices. The impact of this labeling can lead to minimizing the individual experience, unintentionally dehumanizing conflict or aid work as an example, creating the idea of doing things to groups of individuals for expediency and convenience versus working with an individual to get a deeper understanding of a situation or context.

The individual and society are interdependent and intrinsically connected; the individual is an actor in society and individuals can shape and be shaped by society's views and norms. An individual can be considered as part of a complex adaptive system, where the individual and the reality in which the individual exists can influence development through ongoing interactions within the system (Huitt 2012). Elias (1991) developed the concept of the "I" - "We" on the basis of the insight that every individual "I" identity is rooted in a "We" identity and the balance towards one or the other identity may be tipped at different times in a developing society. Elias

(1991) suggests that the individual is associated with an array of social influences and an individual today is shaped in terms of a multitude of social criteria, such as birth dates, occupations, education and religion. The "I" versus "We" dilemma can be contrasted to the plurality of "We," mutual respect for cultures and ability to be part of a society free of prejudice, and the duality of "I" competing fundamental principles of individuals in society (Evolis, n.d). One way I have thought about each "I" is as a bubble that is floating through space and time. Each bubble is a unique individual and as each "I" goes through time and space other bubbles, "We" will be encountered that will influence the path of our individual bubble. This idea can also be thought of in terms of the laws of physics, many particles occupying the same space are likely to collide and have a reaction.

In my reflection, I will explore the definitions and theories that help define individuals more broadly in terms of traits, behaviours, and philosophies (nomothetic view). I will propose an answer to the big question as to what makes an individual unique by discussing key elements of an individual that reinforce each other through an ongoing developmental process (idiographic view) of language, communication, socialization, and storytelling. Finally, I will link the interactions of individuals "We" and an individual "I" in society (complex adaptive system) creating a loop of ongoing human and personality development that goes deeper than the traditional theories and labels to get a basic understanding of a unique individual. I am not about to resolve the decades-long debate between nomothetic and idiographic approaches to understanding individuals or between any one stream of study, sociology, anthropology, psychology or psychotherapy as examples. I will not do justice to the depth and breadth of research in these areas, instead, skimming the surface to synthesize a perspective to help me better answer the big question.

Defining Individuals: Traits, Behaviours, and Philosophies

Over the decades, research has continued to evolve old ideas about human nature and personalities. Scientists from branches of biology, sociology, psychology and physiotherapy have re-examined theories dating back to the Greek Philosophers, such as Theophrastus and Hippocrates. In more recent times this re-examination continued through to the works of Freud and Jung on Psychoanalytics, Rogers and Maslow's works on Humanistic theories, Allport's work on Traits Theory, Bandura's work on Behaviour Theories to more modern developments of Positive Psychology with the works of Little (Allport,1966; Boeree, 2006; Little, 2010; Maslow, 1987; Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011). The literature on individuals is diverse regarding theories, methods, and assumptions across the sciences that comprise grand theories of individual personality characteristics that include age, gender, race, and attitude (Good, 2006).

There is ongoing debate as to what is needed to explain and contribute to the various theories about the big question. Broadly these fall into questions of epistemological (how vulnerable is research knowledge?); methodological (which research approaches are suitable?); explanatory (what is needed for a strong social description?); and ontological (what hypothesizes are needed to pursue research?) (D. Little, 2008). Theories in which individual differences are the central question focus attention on traits and tests that can label and compare people with commonalities (Boeree, 2006). Personality tests based on the nomothetic approach, such as Myers-Briggs, identify dimensions and traits that are often used in organizations to assess individuals (Good, 2006). Each approach covers and bridges varying sciences with theoretical, methodological and empirical research development (Sheldon et al. 2011).

Mischel (1968) is associated with the Cognitive-Affective Personality Theory and ignited a great debate when he proposed that differences in people's behaviour in different situations

could not be accounted for by personality, instead, it was related to the situation. Maslow's

(1987) hierarchy of needs is an illustration of humanistic or motivational need for the general

population. Maslow's (1987) five basic needs include physiological needs (rest, water, food),

security needs (free from harm), social needs (sense of belonging), esteem needs (respect) and

self-actualization needs (maximize potential), all of which can be arranged in an order of

important motivations that an individual strives to fulfill. B. Mayer (2000) has detailed a similar

continuum of human needs grouped into three types: survival needs (food, shelter, health and

security), interests (substantive, procedural, psychological) and identity-based (meaning,

community, intimacy, autonomy).

Behaviouralists, such as Bandura, believe that personality is formed through interactions

with their environment which in turn determines behaviours through a process referred to as

reciprocal determinism (as cited in Boeree, 2006). This view begins to move to an idiographic

explanation as people respond to their environment which drives behaviours, presented within a

framework of social learning theory. Widely accepted traits that have been identified across

cultures are referred to as the big five or OCEAN. The five big traits are **o**pen versus closed-

minded, **c**onscientious, **e**xtroverted versus introverted, **a**greeable versus disagreeable and

neurotic versus stable (Little, 2010). Allport (1966) suggests that there are over 17,000 available

trait names.

In my experience, I can see that these traits are independent of each other and have a

wide latitude of definitions. Positive or negative deviations from these traits can be viewed as not

socially acceptable or outliers. As an example, I have colleagues who are very open in their

conversations to the point where some individuals may consider the openness as "too much

information." Other colleagues are very private and closed and can be seen as not engaged and

unapproachable. While these differences appear in an organizational setting, how would we or how should we interpret these differences across cultural differences in traits? What reference point or group of individuals do we use as the standard? Are we making judgments by looks, from our initial observations, or are we looking at what makes us different at a deeper level? Oliver, Naumann, and Soto (2008) have demonstrated that these questions are relevant and need to be taken into consideration when measuring traits across cultures. The expediency and efficiency of making snap judgments based on initial observations seem to outweigh an investment of time in learning more about unique individuals in our society today at a deeper level. How does this expediency and efficiency in making judgments carry over to other areas of our lives?

Allport (1966) pioneered research on human personality and is renowned in this field for his three-tiered trait theory of personality consisting of cardinal traits (powerful determinants of a person's behavior), central traits (influential and common to all but not direct determinants of behavior) and secondary traits (common to everybody but highly situation specific so not influential in every context). Allport (1966) recognized the complexities of the studies of personality and behaviours and called for the need for the "inside" system to integrate with the "outside" system—in other words, with the situation so as not to neglect the variability introduced by ecological, social, and situational factors. This inside/outside perspective highlights the differing views that human behaviour operates in a deterministic and singular manner versus the competing view that you cannot understand these behaviours in isolation; they must be studied as relationships to one another (Huitt, 2012). In addition to individuals being able to be defined through behavioural, trait and humanistic theories, another view of individuals is through the lens of cognitive theories that feature the following three key components:

1. Cognitive component - our receiving, processing, storage, and retrieval of information;
2. Affective component - before and after the cognitive component, adjusts our perceptions and thinking;
3. Conative component - manages and controls inputs and outputs (Huitt, 2012).

Biological explanations for individuals have also been part of the conversation, suggesting that people are hardwired for personality, and personality is pre-determined, emphasizing genetic factors that impact individuals, their DNA and brain processes. Eysenck's three-factor model of personality (Psychoticism, Extraversion, and Neuroticism) is an example of a biological view (as cited in Boeree, 2006).

As opposed to biological explanations, social contagion theory has been proposed as an alternate explanation in social life for the transmission of behaviours under certain circumstances, an off shoot of medical transmission of diseases. Contagion generally refers to the social transmission of biological disease through contact and, the social transmission, by contact, of sociocultural artefacts or states (Marsden, 1998). Social contagion research covers two key areas, emotional contagions around the spread of mood by simple contact and behavioural contagions that study the spread of behaviours through the population by simple exposure (Marsden, 1998). The Handbook of Social Psychology defines social contagion as "*the spread of affect or behaviour from one crowd participant to another; one person serves as the stimulus for the imitative actions of another.*" (as cited in Marsden, 1998). This view suggest that we gain and transmit behaviours, emotions and beliefs, not through rational choice but, social contagion. The idea of behavioral contagion as a social influencer may explain why certain behaviours exhibited by one person are copied by others who are either in the area of the original initiator of the behaviour, or who have been exposed to stories describing the behavior and then imitate that behaviour. An example of this could be a mob mentality. One could imagine how the

explosion of the internet could facilitate such behavioural contagions on a global scale with the

enormous amount of users, messages and resources available at your fingertips.

Figure 1
Mind, Body, and Spirit - whole person
Note: Huitt, (2012). Retrieved December 12, 2016 from
http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/materials/sysmdlo.html.
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From a more philosophical view, there are frameworks for aspects of human beings such

as mind, body, and spirit that represent the whole person and have been studied since the time of

the ancient Greek Philosophers (Huitt, 2012).

Figure 2
Ikigai, Nimbosa derived from works by Dennis Bodor (SVG) and Emmy van Deurzen
(JPG) (https://t.co/TiRhcMD7HP), via Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved February 6,
2017, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ikigai-EN-optimized-PNG.png,
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The Japanese have a philosophy referred to as Ikigai (pronounced "icky guy"), which is commonly defined as the reason why one gets up in the morning or a reason for being. Ikigai drives a natural reaction to events that arise from a deep connection with life versus reactions based on the expectations of the world around us (Pasricah, 2016). Ikigai is reflective of the complexities and many dimensions of life that an individual faces in defining themselves. These frameworks, mind, body and spirit and Ikigai, go beyond traditional traits and behaviours and begin to incorporate other influences on the individual, such as the spirit or cosmos.

In answering the big question, there are competing theories and philosophies that can be a starting point for reflection:

- materialistic versus non-materialistic;
- deterministic versus free traits;
- motivational versus situational;
- biological versus spiritual;
- philosophical versus sociological.

Referring to the original metaphor of how deep is the mud, there is more to each of the individuals in the mud beyond manifest labels such as height or age. Theories and theorists cover the sophisticated core of individuals to simpler empirical studies looking for differences or commonalities in individuals to a more philosophical meaning of life (Boeree, 2006). Windelband (1894; 1998) contemplated the question of which approach is more relevant to our knowledge, the knowledge of laws (nomothetic) or the knowledge of events (idiographic).

Following the debate started by Mischel (1968) over the social cognitive theory that explains behaviours in terms of situations, there appeared to eventually be a general agreement that the interaction between personality traits and situations best account for behaviours (Little, 2014). When interacting one might consider the role of game theory and the interactions as

strategic; I have a conflict; I seek to maximize my gains; I interact rationally; I anticipate that others will do the same (Crossley, 2011). However, in a complex adaptive system, there is pressure regarding tension and strain which can manifest itself in unstructured frustrations and aggressions, which can be both constructive and destructive and could be reflected in the outlier traits and behaviours (Buckley, 1998).

Figure 3
Fusion of the situational and motivational theories (Own)
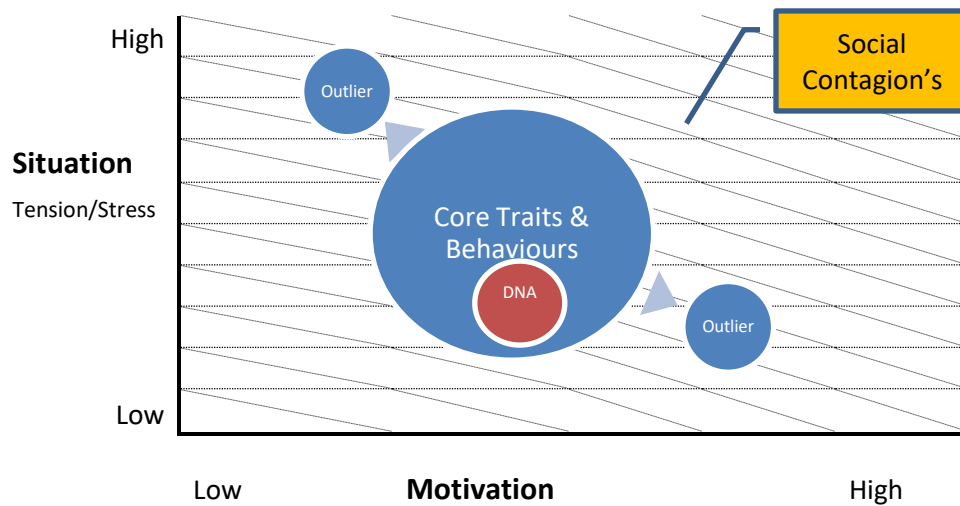
Nordstrom (2007) points out that academic theories are constructed themselves to fit narrow confines of various disciplines and not necessarily multifaceted characteristics of communities. There is an opportunity to fuse many of the disciplines into an interpretation that suggests, based on the situation (cultural, religious, family, organizational as examples) and the motivation (fear, needs, wants, desires) of individuals, a range of traits or behaviours will be displayed, some of which are in a normal range and some which may be considered as outliers or out of character based on the stress or tension of the situation. The answer may not be a clear case of either or, rather recognizing the importance and limitations of each theory or

methodology as research is undertaken. There is a need to keep an open mind to the range of

possible answers that go beyond obvious labels and drive a deeper analysis of the individual.

The unique individual "I."

The individual "I" is basic and any assumptions should be applied to the individual, as a

unique person alone, in a cluster or in relation to a culture (Sherif, 1936). Sociologist Thomas

(1966) proposes that an individual defines situations in terms of either objective realities or

subjective interpretation, making real the consequences of situations. Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim

(1994) have suggested that it is important to understand individual interests which may drive

underlying interests, suggesting that the manifest traits and behaviours that are the labels today

need to be understood in terms of a deeper individual view. There is evidence in the literature

that there are different levels of interests, beliefs, and values at play in an individual and it is

getting to this deeper understanding that can shape individual views of a situations and define

actions, that may not be visible on a cursory view of an individual through labeling of traits and

behaviours (Gulliver, 1979).

A deeper understanding of an individual cannot be preconceived based on assumptions or

labels; it would not be a deep understanding if it were based on preconceived notions of an

individual. This deeper understanding is at the root of the questions, what makes me different,

why do people experience the same situation differently, why do different individuals experience

the mud differently? To answer the big question, beyond the theories and labels that have been

developed, I propose that there are factors that drive an individual to exhibit the traits,

behaviours, and motivations that manifest themselves every day. There are common elements

that work together that are the foundations of an individual. To get a deeper understanding of

unacknowledged norms in society, to better understand the objective and subjective reality of a

unique individual, we need to begin to understand the language people use, which enables their communication, which is influenced by their socialization and this manifests itself in the stories individuals tell in an ongoing developmental loop.

Figure 4
The basic and unique individual at a deeper level, Adapted from Quartermain 2007 (Own). Used with Permission
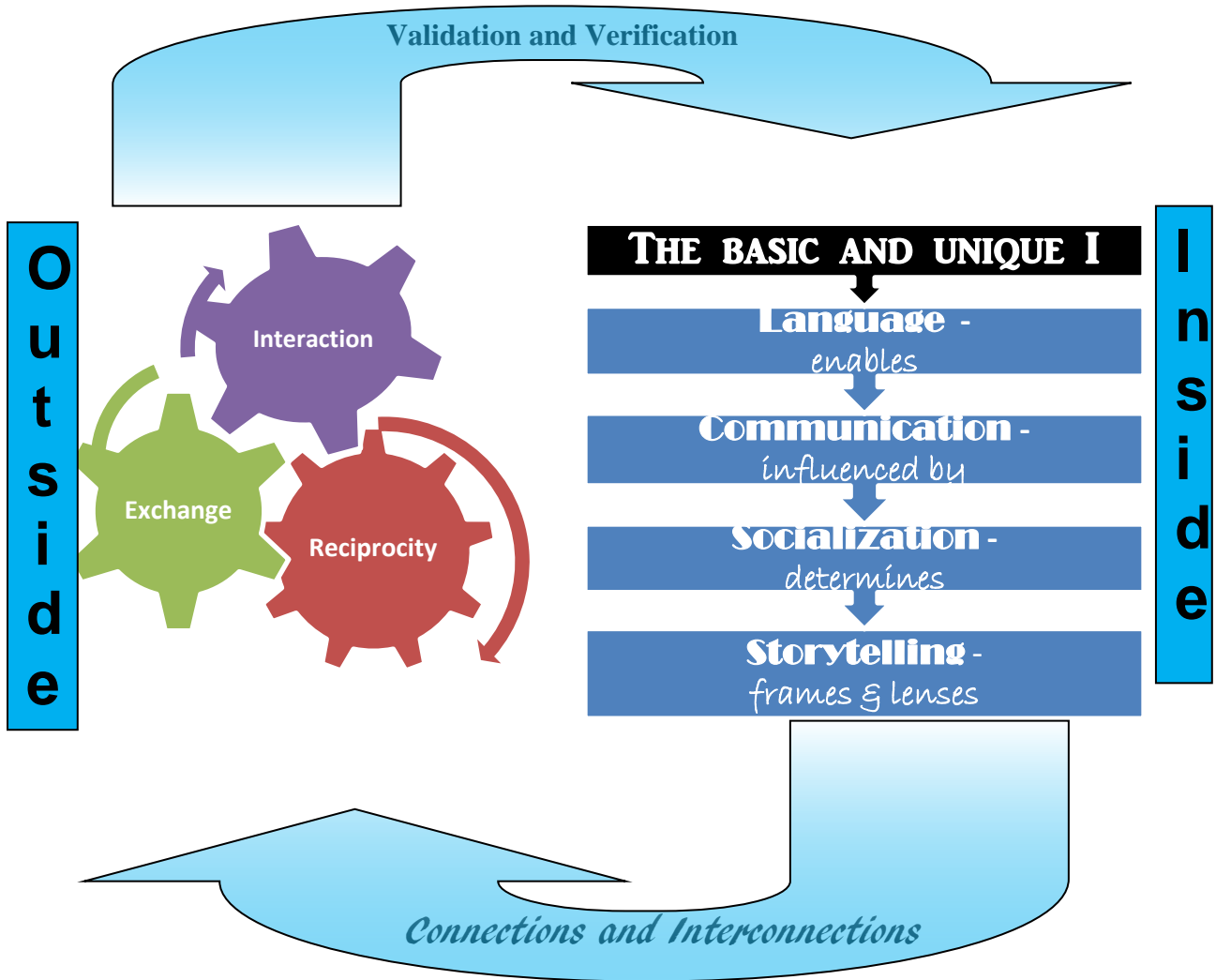
This can be framed as an inside-out view of an individual that incorporates internal and external influences. There is a need to avoid grouping individuals on a data-driven trend line, eliminating behavioural and trait outliers that may mess up research data working towards a middle ground or average, which by extension would make outcomes average. Little (2014)

suggests personal constructs are important because they determine, to some degree, the freedom

we have in shaping our lives and our reality. Exploring the drivers of our reality then is helpful in

understanding the human nature of an individual "I." What this requires of us is to be curious or,

as Windslade and Monk (2001) suggest, have a naïve curiosity. Ledearch (2005) proposes the

idea of 'paradoxical curiosity' which is about respecting the complexity of our world while

seeking answers beyond what is visible to discover new angles, opportunities, and unexpected

potential. Understanding and recognizing the common elements of a unique individual are driven

by these curiosities.

Language and Linguistics

Humans appear to be unique in using a grammatical language (Pinker, 2010). Language

metaphors are used to express ideas, such as how deep is the mud. At the root of language are

symbols consisting of characters or marks which, taken individually, typically have no meaning

by themselves. Symbols or marks allow for the creation of finite sets of symbols in the form of

alphabets or numbers. This group of finite alphabets or numbers is used to form words. Words

are then strung together to form a sequence. Several words are put together to allow the

development of a concept, and it is this relationship of words or expressions to other words or

phrases that create what Bruner (1986) refers to as the "sphere of meaning" (p. 65). This process

creates for us formal language.

People have the ability to create and discover words and systems that are not reliant on

other groups (Pinker, 2010). Many theories have been developed and studied over the years on

verbal expression, emotion, conventional meanings, culture, writing styles and gestures. All too

often, the majority of people have had the experience of having a conversation turn on the

significance of one spoken word which has the roots of different meanings for sender and

receiver. As an example, in my role as a Teaching Assistant, I find myself debating feedback to students over written comments and how those comments translate into a numerical grade mark. How does the word "good" get received by the student versus the message intended by the sender?

Humans can send and receive a multitude of separate messages through a controlled stream of sound or, in the case of signed languages, hand signals, which depend on a complicated coding in the brain that is activated without cognizant effort and training at an early age (Pinker, 1991). Language would typically be based on patterns learned from immediate social environments, referred to as a native language. A potential implication in the different native languages is situations where compensating actions, interactions or reactions take place for weaknesses in language. This compensating action is a possible root for how or why varying traits and behaviours may manifest themselves. An extreme example for illustration may be the person who cannot see and compensates for this by learning and developing other senses and cognitive skills.

Language creates opportunities and consequences for society and the individual. We can take our senses of sight, hearing, sound, taste, and touch and turn them into words to express our environment which Berger and Luckman (1995) have referred to as the opportunity to apply structure to the world through learned relevance and routines, an ordered reality or common sense reality. While this is the opportunity with language, there are also limitations based on this reality. The biggest consequence for the individual is that language allows them to think in the present and if the individual does not appreciate that responsibility, understanding the many realities of the world in which they live, it can have destructive consequences for all. As an example, the language used in conflict situations is not invented but taken from the world around

people, containing structures for thinking and patterns of exchange learned in the cultural context of language (Winslade & Monk, 2001).

Language allows us a tool to communicate, through words, our being and our views of the world. Winslade and Monk (2001) distinguish this feature of language as performative, contradicting the traditional psychology views of language as passive. Language is a pre-condition for communicating. Philosopher Wittgenstein (1972) had suggested that the way we think starts with language that existed before we entered into it; every word has a meaning and as one person calls out a word another may act on it. Crossley (2011) uses the example of the word 'jealousy' and how we could have learned the meaning if it is considered a personal mental state of mind versus learning the meaning of 'jealousy' through interaction in situations and by observing the meaning in the word through inferred and behavioural ways. The science of linguistics distinguishes languages, not only regarding words and patterns but also in terms of grammar that can be impacted by different speakers' styles and vocabularies (Anderson, 2010). With approximately 7,000 distinct languages in the world, the implication is that there must be an unbiased understanding of how the foreign languages of sender and receiver encode messages in communications that are made up of each reality (Anderson, 2010).

Communication

If language is the pre-condition for thought, created and formulated before we enter into it, then communication would be the means by which we convey those ideas. Language has a positive impact on the distribution of messages because it permits messages to be made out of basic components and it allows an individual the opportunity to express an infinite number of messages (Pinker, 2010). B. Mayer (2000) suggests that people create meaning through what they say, how they say it and what they do not say and that people interpret communication on

all these levels both consciously and unconsciously. Hocker and Wilmot (1991) have provided us

with a view that communication is central to all interpersonal conflict in three ways:

communication behaviour can create conflict; communication behaviour imitates conflict, and

communication can produce positive or negative consequences of conflict.

 Communication can be studied in several ways. It can be studied in a linear process as

one piece that facilitates another or as a generic social process (Ellis and Anderson, 2005).

Within communication studies, there are several perspectives that can be considered: a relational

view of communication where a shared meaning is created at the same time by sender and

receiver; a contextual view which places communication in the framework of a given situation; a

strategic view where communication is for the purpose of achieving or influencing goals

(Bennett & Hermann, 1999). My father-in-law was of Italian descent and, when his relatives and

family friends gathered, the language spoken was Italian to me as an observer. However, I was

very quickly educated on the differences in spoken Italian based on the originating city or town

that people immigrated from many years ago, Sicily versus Milan as examples, and the impact

this had on creating a shared meaning. Communication is capable of conveying many different

feelings, thoughts, emotions and intentions in many various forms. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey

(1988) have developed a communication orientation to help gain a deeper understanding,

identifying two major styles of communication as being prevalent:

1. Individualistic value orientation associated with a high context communication style
   with a focus on substantive outcomes through tactics such as the take it or leave
   demand, threats or close-ended questions;
2. Collectivistic value orientations associated with a low context communication style
   with a focus on relational needs and interests of both parties through the use of more
   collaborative tactics.

Facework theory suggests that members of all cultures negotiate over face. Facework theory proposes that our self-image is a common occurrence across cultures and if one's face (self-image) is endangered, an individual will work to save or restore his or her face. Face is problematic in uncertain situations. These situations may include multiple goals and strategies for face protection influenced by relational variables, which may begin to speak to unique individual motivations (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Understanding communication as a complex, multi-tiered and multi- dimensional process allows for movement from above the surface to the underlying needs and interests. There is an undercurrent of motivation, traits, and behaviours that cut across all communications. Communication is a dynamic process that allows us the opportunity to bring meaning to our world. Studying communications can touch on many fields of humanities and sciences, including specialty areas such as rhetoric, which all work to describe the transmission and exchange of information between individuals. The question we need to ask in gaining a deeper understanding of the unique individual is, what creates the meaning or emotions that are expressed in our communications?

Socialization and how our views are shaped

Language is a key enabler of communication and communication is the dynamic process that allows us to bring meaning to our world. Socialization then is the ingredient that creates the meaning we communicate with our language. Variations in culture are shown to be differences in frames of reference common to various groups, and social frames of reference (social norms, values, customs, stereotypes, conventions, etc.) are regarded first as stimuli which meet the individual in his or her associations with others, which then become internalized (Sherif, 1936). Stone, Patton, and Heen (2000) point out to us that, in conversations, we interpret meaning based on our past experiences and the rules we have learned about how things should be. We are

products of our environments and experiences are patterned off those interactions. Mnookin, Peppet, and Tulumello (2000) refer to the construction of reality based on attitudes, values and past experiences. From our upbringing, our learned values, and our experiences, we apply different sets of rules for different sets of situations we encounter, which continually define and re-define everyday life. Arnett (1995) makes a distinction between socialization that involves individualism, independence, and freedom of expression (broad socialization) versus obedience and conformity (narrow socialization), which will differ between cultures.

The socialization processes, in the forms of cultural norms, rules, and rituals, has a considerable influence on the substantive, procedural and psychological meanings in situations. The socialization process creates an individual "I" with a unique and separate view of the world. Individuals are products of their environment and experiences and are shaped by those actions and interactions within that environment. Ellis and Anderson (2005) refer to the different cultural content, values, norms, language, meanings, and identities being instilled in individuals during the socialization process as an important influencer. If only we could align these differences by having you wear my glasses to see the world through my lens. We can only understand if we take the time to step outside the social reality that we know as part of our environment and experience that reality from someone else's perspective.

The unique ability of humans to use language to communicate leads to multiple societies with different realities created in various environments which result in divergent views created through many different applied frames and lenses. It is these differing environments and social interactions that create the needs and interests, the motivations, the traits and behaviours that are continually being altered over time as people are exposed to more of the world (Deutsch, 1973). Thomas (1966) has characterized the social process as "one represented by everything from

fashions to toothpaste; it is emotional, irrational, imitative and mostly unconscious and

sometimes outrageous; it is capable of manipulation and propagation; the results are typical and

publicly accepted definitions of situations."(p. 305).

The socialization process is interdependent and inclusive of the interactions with other

individuals "We." Relationships are formed without knowing if those interactions will be fruitful

in helping the "I" fulfill a need or want in the process (Crossley, 2011). An individual in a

relational world can and will weave together stories that draw upon the present purpose and rely

on the past to construct and engage in relationships that respond to particular situations and

tensions that are edited over time (Crossley, 2011).

Storytelling: constructing our views of the world

Stories told are continually defined and re-defined. Most people will never experience

many of the events that they hear or are told about, making the stories of others that they are told

one of the fundamental avenues from which to learn and make sense out of their environments.

Human thinking has been described as a process where we understand new ideas and

complicated things in relationship to what we already know (Haidt, 2006). Winslade and Monk

(2001) support the importance of stories as the backbone of experiences from which people

construct their stances and take up positions in a conflict. We all have a story to tell, shaped from

our view of the world. The better we can understand the other person's story, the better we will

be able to understand opportunities to minimize and resolve divergences.

Storytelling begins to establish relationships and identities. Metaphors are used in stories

as a way in which an individual can stage communications in a figurative and literal format

providing sources and insights about a conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). A cognitive theory

centered on a therapy story might be thought to consist of several stages where the person telling

the story personalizes it (I am not a good person), makes over-generalizations (why does this always happen to me?), magnifies it (this is going to be the end) and applies an arbitrary inference (no one will ever speak to me again) (Haidt, 2006). As a story starts, it is generally judged based on what people know about how the world operates around them, not necessarily on any formal logic (Bruner, 1986). A general assumption in social reality or, as Thomas (1966) proposed, a fallacy of social reality, is the assumption that we know the world because we live in it and act in it, therefore, we can generalize by common sense without a deeper understanding.

There is an ongoing developmental loop that starts with language which allows us to communicate and what we communicate is our understanding of the world gained through the socialization process and the way we communicate this understanding is through our stories. This developmental loop continues to evolve with the individual throughout life as new interactions, exchanges, and reciprocity takes place through experiences and changing contexts that are encountered. This perspective is in line with many of the theorists and philosophers that have proposed various stages in our development from Freud's five stages to Erikson's eight stages of development suggesting that we are on a continuous journey of exploration and experiential learning (as cited in Boeree, 2006). Tooby and DeVore proposed a Cognitive Niche Theory rooted in cognitive science and evolutionary psychology defined by reasoning about the causal structure of the world, cooperating with other individuals, and sharing that knowledge and negotiating those agreements via language (as cited in Pinker, 2010). These three elements of the cognitive niche theory evolve with other factors such as life-history across multiple generations, longer life spans, complex sexuality, and the amassing of local knowledge and social conventions in distinct cultures (Pinker, 2010). Erikson's eight-stage development theory suggests that the individual advances through life stages, balancing a negotiation between

biological, social and cultural influences, transitioning from each stage with a related virtue (as cited in Boeree, 2006).

Stories are how an individual communicates their unique meaning and reality. Stories are a representation of the social and cultural construction of facts learned through the socialization process. Stories bring together the elements of language, communication styles and constructs of individual realities through unique discourses. How are the stories we are told judged? An individual will validate and verify the construction of some elements from both an internal and external validation perspective (Buckley, 1998). Fisher (1985) has proposed that we judge the probability of a story we hear based on two key concepts:

Narrative Coherence – does the story hang together? – measured by comparing to other stories;

Narrative Fidelity – compatibility with individual beliefs and values in the story; can an individual identify with the message?

There are situations where our stories conflict and this creates a challenge to our believed values. The Waco siege of a compound belonging to the group Branch Davidians (a sect that separated from the Seventh-day Adventist Church) by American federal (ATF) and Texas state law enforcement and US military in 1993 began under the suspicion of weapons violations. The event began when the ATF attempted to raid the ranch and a gun battle erupted, resulting in the deaths of four government agents and six Branch Davidians. Eventually, over 50 days, a final raid was conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) which resulted in the death of the Davidian in a massive fire. Much dispute remains as to the actual events of the siege. Docherty (2001) offers a perspective on the collision of two worldviews in Waco, Texas stemming from two realities. These were Davidian's religious views drawn from biblical references speaking one language versus the FBI agents representing a dominant social

institution and shared social references on how the world should be speaking a different

language, manifesting itself in a violent conflict situation. Understanding the interconnectedness

of the unique "I" and the "We" in the world around us is important to make connections with the

development of our worldviews. Individuals determine the validity of stories based on their

narrative rationality (Fisher, 1985). The Davidians may be drawing on a narrative rationality

related to the collective "We," versus the individualism represented by the FBI. Lederach (2005)

talks in terms of peripheral vision that ignores symptoms and looks for broader patterns of how

things are related, bringing into focus patterns of relationships and how things are connected in a

complex and dynamic view that does not frame choices as either/or. For the Davidians and FBI

was it a case of either/or? Chimamanda Adichie (2009) relates her story of her American

roommate experience where there was an automatic judgment of her, as an African woman and,

in her roommate's story, there was a single perception of being African with no possibility of

them being similar or for a connection as equals. The warning - if we hear only a single story

about other individuals, there is a risk of serious misinterpretations in our interactions (Adichie,

2009).

Each of the areas of language, communication, socialization, and storytelling builds on

the other in creating meaning behind a view of a unique individual, framing a deeper

understanding. There is an opportunity to balance broad homogenous group definitions

(nomothetic), which run the risk of unintended assumptions and narratives about individuals and

situations, to an individual "I" centered understanding (idiographic), working from the inside-out

with an individual through their stories and narratives. A related aspect of the framework

proposed is that a unique individual "I" does not develop in isolation from other individuals

"We," they evolve concurrently in a variety of situations that have a key role in the traits,

behaviours, and philosophies that are manifest in day to day actions and interactions.

Interconnectedness: "I" and "We" and "It."

As connections are made, there is a system that is in place allowing these interactions to

happen. This system, like theories, can take on many different definitions and labels starting

from entropy, through open systems to closed systems to natural systems to complex adaptive

systems (Cleveland, 1994). Many of the theories that define individuals may be considered as

deterministic and linear in their approach, suggesting a consistent and repeatable pattern that may

be defined in terms of autopoietic systems (Cleveland, 1994). In contrast, a complex adaptive

system consists of many "I's" connected to "We's" (such as neighbours), all of whom have a

choice of how to respond to each other allowing for a system that is non-liner and unpredictable.

Buckley (1998) states that a complex adaptive system, whether biological, psychological or

sociological, is marked by four key elements:

1. some plasticity and irritability that has a constant interchange with the environment,
   acting and reacting;
2. a variety of genes, new ideas, and interaction patterns;
3. selective criteria that map variations in the system (natural selection, trial and error,
   learning experience and testing of ideas):
4. preserving and propagating the successful mapping (genetic inheritance; education and
   socialization).

In some regards each individual "I" is their own complex adaptive system that must

navigate the four key elements described by Buckley, acting and interacting with the

environment, generating new ideas, learning and preserving socialization (Jones, 2003). Also,

referred to as complexity theory, another way to think of this is regarding simple rules that can

have more complex relations in a global context. More specifically, Lederach (2005) suggests

that it is the quality and nature of these relationships (acting and interacting) that are a critical

part of social theory, requiring innovation and flexibility (as discussed by Buckley).

Buber (1958) proposes that, society today is based on an "I"–"It", where the "It" consists

of politics, economics, public institutions, and personal life, which are all founded on the view

that every other being is an "It", rather than as part of a "We". The result is that the "I" and "We"

has come to feel disenchanted because society today is exclusively about "It" (Buber, 1958).

Elias (1991) suggests that today, the individual "I" in society is more highly valued than what the

"I" has in common with the collective "We."

In gaining a deeper understanding of "I," there is an exchange of values, norms, and

experiences that facilitate the learning between the "I" and the "We." An important and

underlying dynamic process that assists with balancing the "I" and "We" is the concept of

reciprocity. Haidt (2006) has suggested that reciprocity of information exchange is like a magic

wand that can clear a way through the jungle of social life; it is the most important tool for

getting along with people. Crossley (2011) refers to this social interaction process as an

exchange. Gulliver (1979) states that the flow of information "permits a continuous process of

learning by each party about the requirements, preferences, expectations, perceptions, attitudes,

feelings, strengths and weaknesses of both opponent and himself" (p. 5-6). Buckley (1998)

introduces the concept of tension in a complex system that is the force behind the development

and maintenance of the system. In many readings on social interactions, the concept of

reciprocity is accepted as a social norm.

Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979) proposed an interaction of human development across
several levels;

- Microsystems - groups and institutions that have a direct impact on the development of the individual, which includes families, schools, religions, communities, work and friends;

- Mesosystem - connections and interactions with the microsystems;

- Exosystem - relationships between social situations in which the individual has more of a passive role versus an active role; as an example one child's experience with a parent at home may be influenced by the another child's experience;

- Macrosystem - includes social, economic, political, poverty, and culture elements which evolve over time; each age group may influence the macrosystem leading to development of a new and unique macrosystem;

- Chronosystem - external events and transitions over the course of a lifetime, an example of this may be marriage or divorce.

Figure 5
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. Copyright by Hchokr at English Wikipedia via Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved February 6, 2017, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ABronfenbrenner's_Ecological_Theory_of_Development_(English).jpg. Used with Permission.
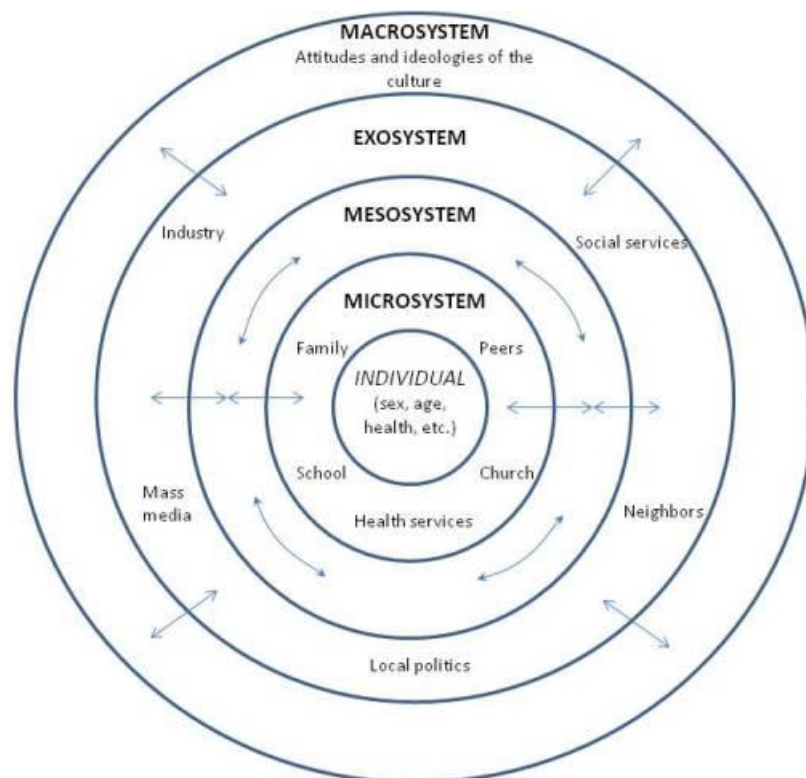
This complex system is continually interacting in reciprocal interactions that emerge

from normal cycles, and no two people express their abilities or talents in the same way as any

other individual, which produces uniqueness (Hamilton, 2013). This interdependency and

connectedness can also be visually viewed as a social ecological systems model that has the

individual at the core of and embedded in family, community, region through to international and

global communities and finally the universe and spiritual (Huitt, 2012). Society is knit together

by an overlapping but non-comprehensive set of relationships, values, and identities and

individuals share values and identities with other individuals and this defines one aspect of the

social connectedness (Nielsen, 2011). Storytelling can bridge the gap between micro-meso-exo

and macro-level by providing a link between the dominant society discourses at each level and

the individual personal stories.

Figure 6
Levels of interactions and relationships of an individual
Huitt, (2012). Retrieved December 12, 2016 from
http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/materials/sysmdlo.html.
Used with Permission
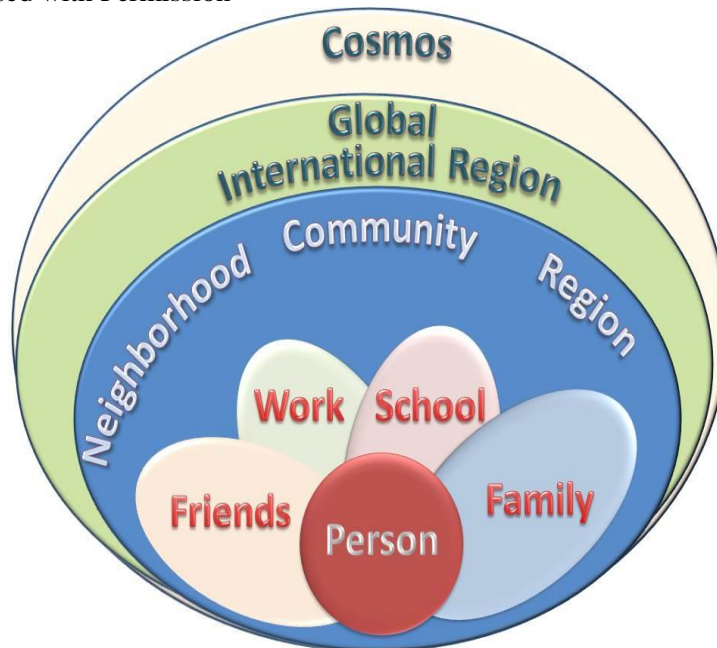
Individuals interact with other individuals through economic, political, or cultural transactions which help to define other elements of interconnectedness. Everyone in a society is related to a set of network relationships to many other people in society, but there is no set of network relationships that encompasses everyone (Nielsen, 2011). There are opportunities to introduce related psychological studies and debates such as group think and the impact on interactions at the micro and meso level in situations with individuals, such as organizations or political thinking, and how it may affect rational outcomes and process or policy frameworks (Hart, 1991).

On a deeper level, each unique individual "I" is his or her own center (core) and will have overlapping peripherals with other unique individuals based on interactions between the various levels of micro, meso and macro. These overlaps can bridge into other social theories that includes complex adaptive systems, chaos theory and social network theories to name a few. Our lives, as we interact, are composed of many overlapping and different stories, both our own and others (Adichie, 2009).

Figure 7
Individual core and overlapping peripheral connections (Own)
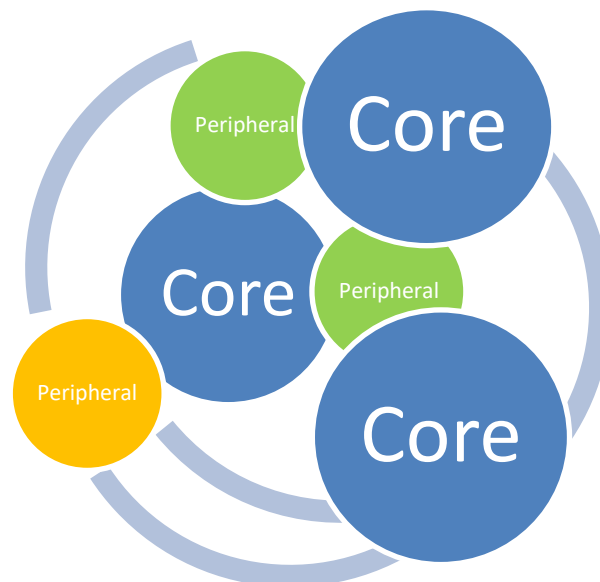
The complexities in understanding interconnectedness cut across many of the same fields of study initially identified as informing the answer to the big question. As an example, the importance of the studies of language and linguistics can focus on the changes and transfer of sounds or words from one language system to another through networks of social interaction. Meadows (2001) points out that it is important, from a systems perspective, to take the time to look back to learn the history of the system and one method of doing that is by asking those individuals that are part of the system today.

The reality of our world is that an individual is involved in multiple relations across multiple social worlds (Crossley, 2011). Even in the relationships between two people in the same group, their personal histories are not the same; each evolves from a unique position with a unique history through to death (Elias, 1991). The deepest history is rooted in the narrative story that forms the understanding of how individuals understand their place in the world in a symbolic sense and in relation to a particular geography in a literal sense (Lederach, 2005).

Emergence, Convergence, and Evolution

In observing the individual in action in this complex adaptive system today, there is an opportunity to derive the substance of new relations that are evolving through exchanges and interactions. The complex adaptive system's organization will change on two levels, the socio-cultural and the individual level (Buckley, 1998). Recent news articles offer examples of these changes, reflecting both the socio-cultural and individual changes, such as the convergence of identities via the internet, the emergence of gender fluidity, the evolution of the social innovation and the role of government with regard to social capital.

Many Western cultures promote a view of the self as independent and society as individualistic, while other cultures promote collectivism and the self as interdependent. In a

social context, the individual is constantly concerned with harmony and balance but challenged

by the levers of individualism versus collectivism alternatives (Elias, 1991). A convergence of

identities through the Internet has the great potential to redefine the individual. As an example,

the evolution from traditional agricultural economies to industrial economies to the age of digital

information and big data is having widespread influence on the ways societies, communities, and

families are being socialized and communicating today, with both positive and negative

implications (Huitt, 2012). Historically, the center of our socialization process was at the micro

level with family, friends, and peers but, with the dawn of the Internet, individuals can access

data about other stories that can inform their socialization beyond their easily accessible and

local core spheres. Individuals can join virtual communities today. This move may be part of a

natural evolution and can be accelerated, not only with the explosion of the Internet of Everyhing

(IoT), but also increased urbanization and speed of travel providing more immediate and

increasing information and choices for an individual (Elias, 1991).

Author John Boyden claimed native ancestry and became a leading spokesman for

Aboriginal rights; did he invent his identity based on aboriginal history (Talaga, 2017)? Rachel

Dolezal, President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was

outed as "white" after positioning herself as "coloured"; she had spent years pretending to be

black (Lawler, 2015). In both cases, their identities could be argued to be invented based on

other stories versus their own. How often are individuals crafting and re-defining their identities

based off of internet stories today? With the number of global conflicts today and a large number

of refugees creating a humanitarian emergency, how will people be impacted in their

socialization by changes in cultural reference points? If all these individuals grow up in a

different cultural context, what are the risks associated with thinking that this is the way the

world operates (single story) versus this is the way the world is in alternate and overlapping

contexts and cultures (Boeree, 2016)? For those that live in and grow up in conflict areas, can

armed conflict become part of the socialization process and what impact will this have on the

long-term prospects for peace in those areas (Green, 1995)?

Recently there have been emerging developments in the area of gender fluidity. Tinder

members had two gender choices in the recent past, male or female. In 2016, the online service

announced that there would now be 37 choices to select from to address the changes in gender

identity that are happening globally (Mallenbaum, 2016). The Australian Sex Survey lead by

researchers at The Queensland University of Technology offered 33 gender options for those

filling out the survey (Whighamn, 2016). Can individuals self-select a gender identity that now

suits them and when it does not suit them by simply clicking a box on a selection menu? And if

these changing views become the new norm will we see more conversations and calling outs of

academics such as Jordan Peterson at the University of Toronto over his expression of the belief

that your choices of gender are man or woman (Peet, 2016, p. A10). Is gender fluidity an

example of the" I" influencing the "We" for change or is the "We" shaping the worldviews of

the "I"? In some regards it reminds me of the old age question of what came first, the chicken or

the egg.

In the area of social innovation and development, how will this area need to evolve and

what changes will need to be considered? Kania and Krammer (2013) suggest shifting mindsets

will be necessary that will require more evaluative processes that are inclusive of open-ended

inquiry of activities as they emerge versus testing pre-determined solutions retrospectively. For

complexity theorists, a more evaluative process can be framed in by the quality of the research,

versus expediency and efficiency. Will the expediency and efficiency of conventional

approaches begin to be challenged for different types of investment to fund more in-depth

research to learn more about a unique individual before applying a pre-determined solution?

Where typically a social solution is funded, the idea of emergent inquiries and solutions may

require donors to look at supporting different proposals and outcomes over longer periods of

time. The idea of collective impact is changing the view of how we make social progress on a

global scale, and the necessary resources and approaches will have to evolve with these changing

views (Kania and Krammer, 2013). Autesserre (2009) pointed to her experience in the Congo

that might best illustrate the expediency of applying pre-determined solutions to post-conflict

peacebuilding interventions. In the Congo peacebuilding frames were shaped by an international

(Western) understanding of the conflict. These frames doomed local peace efforts that were

being deployed at a deeper and more individual level and were used to justify international

practices and policies. Is this an example of a pre-conceived Western view of the world being

implemented without a full inquiry?

     A question and debate around the idea of social capital and the responsibility of

government, particularly given the recent United States election, is an emerging and evolving

area of discussion. Putnam (1995) characterizes social capital as...... "features of social

organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and

cooperation for mutual benefit "(p.77). Academics and politicians globally struggle with the

issue of growing social capital as research shows social capital can generate a happier and

healthier populace, hold government more accountable, and improve financial outcomes (Sander

and Putnam, 2010). Both Aristotle and Plato agreed that individuals realized their potential

through the political community, in relation to rather than as against, each other (as cited in

Ehrenberg, 1999). The task of government then is to harmonize the various forces at work in

society to ensure all can share in the good life or American Dream from a Western perspective.

Aristotle would suggest that strong political structures help protect different classes from one

another and guard against deterioration based on suspicion, greed, privilege and violence (as

cited in Ehrenberg, 1999). Given our current political, economic and social environment, how

will the actions of government change the interactions of individuals over the next years? How

will current politics impact our social interactions? The Trump government appears to be on a

path where they are systematically undermining key institutions (by claiming the voting system

is rigged; the intelligence community is incompetent; climate change is a hoax; the media is

corrupt) through the creation of parallel and alternate realities while creating a greater divide in

social stratification across race and religion (Dale, 2017, p A1). Where will this protectionist and

divisive approach take America and the global society at large? Along with alternate facts, will

governments continue to play what has been called identity politics to further political agendas

and stratify the population (Bonokoski, 2016; Smith, 2017)?

Conclusion

Windelband (1894; 1998) asked the question as to whether we can decide from the

beginning if a particular observation is indeed a fact. As socialization moves to a more inclusive

worldview, how does one manage languages and linguistics to develop a common meaning and

understanding? There are many words that either do not translate well into certain languages or

have no translation at all. How would my opening metaphor translate into other languages,

would it be viewed literally or figuratively? A key advance in this context is McAdams's (1985)

life story model of identity which suggests that individuals in society today present their lives

with meaning by constructing internal and changing narratives of themselves. This idea that

identity is situated in a story connects with themes in cognitive research, personality theory,

motivational and situational models, and psychology views (McAdam, 1985).

The frames and labels we use can build unintentional assumptions about individuals in a

situation influencing our actions (Lederach, 2011). Philosopher Evola (1995) suggests that

beyond stories, distinct notions of the world follow a system of truths, principles,

understandings, symbols and realizations, and this can be in transition during different cycles of

history, particularly when a focus is on current times and structures that people may lean towards

for some measure of stability. The exchanges we participate in will encourage our view of others

or discourage us to a view of self, either way it is a system of dynamic, sometimes irrational,

actions and interactions that cannot be defined by narrow theories. Science is moving from fully

relying on substance (labels) and beginning to focus on relations between components in a

complex system (Buckley, 1998).

The stories that we tell are a construct of our unique and individual "I" socialization

process. An analysis process that provides an opportunity to go beyond a narrow and focused

approach to one that offers a more inclusive discussion centered on relationships, trust, rituals,

respect, and understanding can provide a deeper understanding of an individual "I" and "We" as

they interact in an interconnected and intertwined complex adaptive global ecosystem. The basic

and unique individual can be viewed through the lenses of language and linguistics that enable

communications that are driven by socialization which is manifest in the stories and narratives

told. This view allows us to go beyond the theories that tend to generalize and label the

individual with other similar individuals. How do we move, in practice, from the idea of the

outside knowledge of individuals to the inside knowledge of a unique individual in order to

develop insights that drive a deeper understanding of the actions and interactions of individuals in life situations?

   The relationship between the individual and society is ultimately one of the most reflected on of all problems and questions in the philosophies and sciences because it involves perceptions of social norms, morals and values in an interconnected and unpredictable system. Each individual response is in a relational view to how things should be, how an individual assesses them to be, and the appropriate action chosen. Whether the actions are correct or not are not the concern of others or of the social norms of society, but of how an individual's actions turn up in their reality. Given the multi-faceted nature of research; the interaction between subjects and objects of research; the irregular and non-linear patterns of an unpredictable and complex system; the continuous developmental loops which change the nature of the system - this should make us curious. And when we have this curiosity it drives us to observe, research and explore differently and reflect more deeply. The final intent of reflecting on the big question was not to suggest one model or approach is better than another but simply to tell my story. It was to explore a curiosity.

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