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### Crystalized Politics: An Analysis of Personal and Political Identity

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Crystalized Politics:  
An Analysis of Personal and Political Identity  
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Spring 2020

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### Abstract

In this day and age questions of identity and questions of politics seem to become more and more intertwined. Accordingly, the interrogation of these interrelated concepts deserves investigation. This study seeks to understand how people through communication are able to negotiate between personal and political identities. Through qualitative methods of analysis and using the lens of facework theory, it was discovered that people go through a three-part process of identification, performance and justification of their personal and political identities which have significance for both Tracy and Trethewey's model of crystalized identity but also for facework theory. Though this theory does have significant theoretical significance, data collection was conducted during a pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, its practical theory is very limited.

*Keywords:* Identity, political identity, identity negotiation, facework, communication, crystalized identity

## Crystalized Politics:

### An Analysis of Personal and Political Identity

Identity is a nebulous term. Some might consider it to be a term of art because it can be used in so many different ways in so many different contexts. Yet, in almost all of its uses, it generates similar philosophical questions: Who are we? And how do we know who we are? Different disciplines provide different answers to these questions which emphasize different aspects of identity. Political scientists and sociologists will say that it has something to do with our demographics or social groupings, psychologists will say that it has something to do with our personality and communication scholars will point to the performance of our respective identities. They are all talking about the same thing that is the concept of identity, but they are doing it in a different way. The scope of political communication tends to be rather limited. The majority of political communication research tends to be focused on the larger implications of communication, such as how a communicative action can help a candidate win an election, or what the role of the media is in agenda setting (Spitzberg et. al., 2020). To me this seems like a very one-sided analysis of the realm of politics. Given our political structure, the everyday citizen wields a significant amount of political power. It is my own personal view that this power is generally a good thing, however the power of the vote can be misused because of misunderstandings (Caplan, 2011). When you also take into consideration the hyperpolarization of our current government it makes you wonder how it got this way. While surely there is something to be said about the demographic circumstances of voters and the allure of a particular candidate or party platform, there is also something to be said about the personal communication of politics. This study serves to speak to that area of research. Numerous studies have pointed to the causal reasons for a certain political stance (Fatke, 2017; Huddy, 2001). Plus, many popular

publications have also put in their two cents; the Wall Street Journal recently published an article stating that Republicans and Democrats not only have different political stances, but they live in different worlds as determined by things such as their income, job and neighborhood (Zitner and Chinni, 2019). It would follow that they would be living entirely different lived realities. Yet, both Republicans and Democrats both live in the same country, have access to the same resources, at least on a governmental level, and participate in the same systems of governance. I think it is incredibly important to understand why voters have come to realize their political position as authentic and valid, but also somehow diametrically different from that of their opponent as informed by communication. Consequently, this study attempts to understand how people are able to negotiate between the various personal and political identities at play.

### **Review of the Literature**

Before considering the literature surrounding identity, I must first make clear my position. This is communication-based study. While there are implications for political science, the questions that I intend to ask all generally revolve around how people communicate.

### **Conceptualization of Communication**

I take the position that the world with which we live in is socially constructed. While there might be some material reality, the meanings that are created within that reality are created between people by interactions (Yerby, 1995). Therefore, knowledge development is influenced directly by communication. It is also highly contextual, Yerby points out that “Our identity as persons, the stories we tell as we negotiate diverse situations, and what counts as knowledge - including our knowledge and understanding of communication - are systemically embedded in a vast web of ever-changing social and historical contexts” (1995). There are no objective truths then, everything is dependent on the social and communicative environment. To be able to

discover truth, social constructionism requires three parts. The first is that people must be social with each other because construction is a collaborative process (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Second, something must be created, in this case, rather than creating something like a house, meaning is created. For meaning to be created first there must be some concept which must be converted from the abstract to the concrete. Once concrete this meaning must be used in order to continue retaining meaning. If used properly, the meaning will evolve according to the context for the meaning will die. (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). The last aspect of constructionism is the delineation between a physical reality which largely lies unchanged by any meanings that are ascribed and the social reality which is meaning dependent. Language plays an essential role in constructionism because it is the vehicle with which meaning is created and used (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009) So, any alterations to a socially constructed meaning must be done via language.

Social constructionism is particularly useful in the context of this study because of the required nuance. Because of social constructionism's ability to accommodate for nuance, it can provide a more wholistic understanding various rationales and motivations such as emotion (Tracy, 2000). Furthermore, this flexibility is particularly useful when asking people to describe their feelings regarding politics. Namely that they will provide different interpretations of the same event based on their contextual position. Additionally, Leeds-Hurwitz points out that "social construction theory lends itself particularly well to discussion of the connection between the macro and micro. Most often this implies using analysis at the microlevel (specific words, images, actions) to examine a macroprocess (or structure, or institution)" (2009). This is particularly useful as personal and political identity can exist at different levels of the identity continuum.

## Applied Review of the Literature

Identity is a term in multiple disciplines with slightly different meanings. Because of this I will discuss identity in two parts, first from a communications perspective and then from a more political scientific based perspective.

### (Communication) Identity

Even within the field of communication the theories covering identity are plentiful. In the Encyclopedia of Communication Theory, identity is defined as

“The cultural, societal, relational, and individual images of self-conception, and this composite identity has group membership, interpersonal, and individual self-reflective implications. Identity is a colorful kaleidoscope with both stable and dynamic characteristics.” (Ting-Toomey, 2009)

This current definition is the result of a long evolution of identity theories. Of particular import to this potential study is the concept of a crystalized form of identity as proposed by Sarah J. Tracy and Angela Trethewey in 2005. Tracy noted that many identity theories made it so that the “identity construction process was a site of struggle over individual and collective meanings” (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005 p. 168). Under this concept of identity Tracy and Trethewey argued that there is a real-self/fake-self dichotomy that is created, and this dichotomy has become a popularized idea in our culture. For example, if you were to go to the self-help section of a Barnes and Noble bookstore today you would find numerous titles all advocating for the reader to be able to find their *real* self. This would imply that there is a superficial identity that is created and an identity that is more authentic to a person. This has significant implications, Tracy and Trethewey note that:

some employees will go to great lengths to align their seemingly real selves with the preferred organizational self. In cases, however, when the organizational self is so distasteful that this seems unattainable, employees may endeavor to separate their seemingly real selves from organizationally prescribed selves. These identity



management processes have troublesome consequences for organizations and their actors. (2005 p. 177)

To that end, organizations can use a perception of one's self (identity) as a politicized tool. Critical scholars such as Tracy and Trethewey make it clear that this politicization of identity is an important expression of power. As a way to respond to this power, Tracy posits the idea of the crystalized self:

The crystallized self is neither real nor fake. It is not flattened suffocated or colonized. The crystallized self is multidimensional—the more facets, the more beautiful and complex. Certainly crystals may feel solid, stable, and fixed, but just as crystals have differing forms depending upon whether they grow rapidly or slowly, under constant or fluctuating conditions, or from highly variable or remarkably uniform fluids or gasses, crystallized selves have different shapes depending on the various discourses through which they are constructed and constrained. We suggest, somewhat boldly, that a crystallized self is stronger, more beautiful, and more productive for a variety of (political) purposes and downright better than a planar self. (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005 p. 186)

It should be noted that this is an organizational theory of identity. However, it is my view that this theory can be applied to our system of governance if you consider electoral politics to be a larger more broadly bounded organization. Given the fact that researchers will undoubtedly use a definition of identity that will fit the scope of their research it seems necessary that there be some uniform way to talk about identity that is fluid enough to accurately describe identity.

### **(Political) Identity**

In terms of political identity there are similar themes involved. The International Encyclopedia of Political Science states that “identity is a somewhat ambiguous term and a contentious concept” that can have personal, social, cultural, and national dimensions (Westle, 2011). The Encyclopedia of Political Theory has a slightly more concrete definition of identity which states “Identity refers to the fundamental defining characteristic of an individual or group.

Having a sense of identity—of being oneself and not another or of belonging to one group and not another—would appear to be intrinsic to human communities” (Muldoon, 2010). So, it seems that within the scope of political science, identity refers to some aspect that groups use to create delineations of an ingroup and an outgroup. This view of identity is defined much differently than that of the communication perspective. This is due to differences in philosophy, in the realm of political science, generally speaking, identity is more easily reducible to the defining characteristics of an entity. Communication on the other hand takes the perspective that these characteristics are much less concrete and are the results of ongoing discourse. However, researchers are noting that there is something more subjective to identity than just ingroup and outgroup identification. Huddy suggests a transition from boundaries to meaning “Boundaries connote an all-or-nothing membership; meaning holds out the possibility of degrees of similarity” (2001 p. 146). Huddy concedes that the majority of identity research in the realm of political science is largely limited to lab based studies that focus on more concrete identities such as ethnicity, employment status and political affiliation but notes that social scientist are starting to pay more attention to more subtle and potentially fluid markers of identity such as gender, college major and occupation (2001). Additionally, within the past fifty years there has been a considerable amount of focus on *identity politics*. Identity politics is a blanket phrase to describe political movements that exist beyond shared belief positions. Rather this new brand of politics “typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.” (Heyes, 2018) Identity politics recognizes that there are many interdependent factors beyond just group membership. Additionally, identity politics serves to

give power to historically underrepresented voices such as women and indigenous groups.

(Heyes, 2018) This is understanding is incredibly important because it acknowledges that certain political systems can ignore some constituencies and support others if it is in the interest of the political system.

### **Identity Negotiation**

Because identity is constantly being formed, reshaped, ignored and acknowledged it is important to consider how we negotiate between aspects of identity. Facework Theory provides an explanation for how we navigate the realm of identity. The central idea is that like a physical face, you also have a social face which is constructed through communication. (Shimanoff, 2009) Identity according to Facework Theory is co-constructed meaning that a given identity is the result of the interaction between more than one people; so you would have a different identity as a result of communicating with your priest than you would have communicating with your mother or father. (Domenici & Littlejohn, 2006 p. 4) Additionally, people can also have a continuum of identity ranging from personal identity which is focused on who you are as a person to relational and community identities which are who you are in larger contexts. (Domenici & Littlejohn, 2006 p. 6) This indicates that identity is heavily context dependent. To that end you can have both a personal identity with related to who you are individually and a political identity which is related to a social affiliation which is much larger than yourself and these identities can be called upon and performed depending on the context. This process of calling upon and performing is called *facework*. Here people that are interacting can *give-face*, *receive-face*, and respond to face *threats* in order to maintain their identity and the identity of others. (Domenici & Littlejohn, 2006; Shimanoff, 2009; Ting-Toomey, 2009) Face-giving practices can consist of honoring others such as by complimenting someone or otherwise

speaking positively. Face-receiving practices consist of accepting praise and acknowledging the work of others. Lastly, people can respond to face threats in a myriad of ways including but not limited to avoidance and minimization of face issues, or dissolution of the threat.

### **Research Question**

R1: How do people use communication to negotiate between personal and political identities?

### **Method**

This is a longitudinal qualitative study using ethnographic research methods. Qualitative ethnographic methods are particularly appropriate for this study because I am looking to discover aspects of identity that are not readily apparent in a survey, and cannot be easily reduced into discreet numbers. Research methods will include conversational interviews, semi-structured interviews, transcriptions of semi-structured interviews, and document collection. I found my participants for this study by reaching out members of the University of Portland Community to obtain access to conduct the observational study. Originally, I planned to conduct these interviews in person, however due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19, in person interviews posed a risk to public health so interviews were performed using the video conference software Zoom. During my observations, I invited participants to engage in a semi-structured interview. Interviews are the most effective method of data collection given the structural and temporal constraints for this study. Additionally, according to Sarah Tracy, “interviews are especially valuable for providing information and background on issues that cannot be observed or efficiently accessed” (Tracy, 2013 p. 132). The snowball method was also be used during both observations and interviews as a method of networking with other participants throughout the organization. Participant identities were kept confidential and all participants are identified with

a pseudonym. This study of identity focuses upon the communication patterns (such as everyday language patterns, rituals, norms) that are a meaningful part of the identity creation. The hope is that in lieu of observation these patterns can be gleaned from interviews. In the interviews I started by asking questions that involve some dichotomy. These dichotomies are created based on the Five Factor model of personality. These traits are extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Spitzberg et al., 2020). While personality is very different from identity, it has been shown that there is a strong correlation between these personality traits and political ideology (Fatke, 2017). These hypothetical situations were designed to create some dilemma that the participant will have to not only pick a side but provide some substantive explanation for why they would act the way that they did. This creates an opportunity for me to ask probing questions to help understand why they came to the decision that they did. I assume that they have some prior personal experience that informed their decision and I hoped to be able to see a connection between their experience and their decision. After I concluded my interviews, I then transcribed them. I conducted six interviews in total. The interviews were transcribed using the meeting transcription software otter.ai and then were scrubbed for accuracy and confidentiality this resulted in one hundred and thirty-five pages of transcribed interview text. To analyze this data, once the interviews were transcribed, they were manually coded. This coding process was conducted in three phases. First, I conducted primary cycle coding where the data was analyzed and assigned words or phrases that captured the essence of what the data was showing (Tracy, 2013 p. 189). These primary cycle codes were then categorized. These categories were then organized into overarching themes. These themes comprise the findings section of this paper.

## Findings

Over the course of the research, I found that people perform their identities in three major parts. I will call them the identification stage, the performance stage, and the justification/clarification stage. The identification phase is when individuals highlight aspects of identity, the performance phase is either an adoption of those aspects of identity or a distancing from those aspects of identity, followed up by the justification phase where the individual provides some rationalization for their performance either in support or opposition of those identity facets.

### Identification

The identification phase is very clear cut. Participants described how they identified by highlighting attributes which they would ascribe to themselves in a given context. All of the participants described themselves as more liberal leaning over all in a political context, though they identified different aspects that were indicative of their liberalness. For example, Ford described her sense of liberalness as a sense of freedom:

I feel as though my beliefs come more towards the idea that everyone should have a choice, like the freedom to choose what they want what they want to think, and doesn't necessarily have to do with a specific community of people or like ideals that are specific to one group. I mean, like, my thoughts are, you shouldn't have to be like, you're not, You don't have to choose one way or the other. You have the freedom to decide. (Ford 311-316)

A different participant, described his liberalness relative to his core beliefs that liberalness can bring about the greater good in a political sense:

I would identify more liberal. Because I do believe that because of systematic issues, that and other reasons that we as people should forego some of our own personal security and wealth for the betterment of society, especially for those underprivileged, whether it be because of systematic or even just, you know, poverty issues, and a sort of that thing. I definitely lean more towards the greater good in that sense. (Koenigsegg 212-223)

Crosstrek described her openness to new things as the hallmark of being a more liberal person in a political sense, however she also described herself as being more conservative in a personal sense:

I mostly consider myself liberal and being open minded and, like willing to change or learn or whatever it is and be progressive in that way. But also conservative and just like, like, who I am as a person and like, like, I'm introverted and I'm shy sometimes or like, you know, a sudden, like conservative of my own person comes to other people and meeting new people. (Crosstrek, 311-35)

In this case rather than solely identifying affirmatively with an abstract value such as freedom, or by rooting her liberalness as an aspect of her politics, she also clarified that there is more nuance to her identify and that in a different context she might identify differently and because the context changed the performance of her identity would also change.

### **Performance**

In terms of the performance phase, participants described different methods of how they maintained their identities in various different contexts. One way in which this is done is by ignoring the identities of others. For example, Crosstrek described a situation where ignorance turned into avoidance. I asked how she would respond to someone who had fundamentally different ideals than she did:

Well, the experience I had was a very short relationship. And the other person was very religious. And I was not or I am not, I'm not a religious person. Um, but like, like, it doesn't matter to me as long as it's not something that they're like, shoving down my throat and like trying to change about me. Like, I don't know if I could be in our long term relationship with someone who was like super republican or super conservative or super religious just because that's not my lifestyle. And those are very different lifestyles when you play them out sometimes. And just like ideals are different and I just don't really connect with those kinds of people. (Crosstrek, 185-191)

In this case she attempted to ignore the religious identity of the other person until it be irreconcilable at which point, she was able to extricate herself from the relationship. In a

different example Baja identified himself as liberal but then immediately distanced himself from the label of being *a liberal*:

I'm liberal leaning. But I get irritated by the label and a lot of people that are, call themselves call themselves liberals. Because what if I wanted to vote for someone who was conservative? I just think it creates too much of a duality. (Baja, 272-280)

In this instance Baja picked a label but then by distancing himself from that label, he was able to add more depth and nuance to his identity. Ignorance and distancing are two ways in which people are able to perform away from an identity. Conversely others are able to perform into an identity. For example, Jeep first described his liberalness by having an affinity for the outdoors and this is how he describes performing that affinity:

Another big part of my identity is like all growing up I did a lot of like with my dad and grandpa a lot of fishing, a lot of camping and a lot of hiking. So, I think a lot of like, obviously I still do a lot of that. And I've done a lot of that my whole life. And that's a big part of my identity and who I am. (Jeep, 301-305)

In this case Jeep used this performance of personal identity to support his political viewpoint that the environment is important and should be protected.

### **Justification**

Lastly, participants justified their identity performance. In some cases participants felt the need to explain why they would avoid someone else with a different identity like in the aforementioned excerpt from my interview with Crosstrek. In that case she felt as if religion was being “shoved down [her] throat,” as a result the best course of action for her was to leave the relationship for her own identity preservation. In a different case, Jeep described a setting where he sought out people with different identities:

I may not agree with where their political views are, but there's a lot more to a person than their political beliefs and like, it's interesting to me to see like to, like, get to know someone and see like, you can, you know, you can kind of read a person and figure out like, it's usually you can figure out pretty quickly where a person's political views align. And then it's interesting when you get to know them to see like, what their childhood was



like, and, like the stuff they say, and you can be like, Oh, so that's why, you know, they'd start, start to like, put the pieces of the puzzle together. You know, it's pretty interesting, I think. (Jeep, 436-442)

In this case Jeep opted to ignore aspects of someone else's identity in favor of others because he realized that people are not reducible to a single aspect of their identity.

### **Discussion**

With these findings in mind there are two aspects that are important for discussion. First these findings represent a realization of Tracy and Trethewey's concept of a crystalized identity (2005). To that end political and personal identities are different facets of the same crystal and not independent entities. People, through communication, are able to maneuver each of their individual crystals to reflect their desired identity given the context. Additionally, there is also some maneuverability on the part of the viewer as well because they are able to ignore or avoid aspects of someone else's identity if they so choose. This would support the co-constructed nature of identity because both parties are working to move each other's crystals simultaneously to ensure a more appropriate performance of identity in a given context.

The second aspect of interest is the why the participants felt the need to justify aspects of their identity. The identification and description of identity performance are unsurprising given the fact that data was collected via interviews and not using other qualitative methods such as participant observation. In order to fully describe a situation participant needed to name what was going on, and then show how it played out. Some of the questions that were posed as part of the semi-structured interviews demanded the defense of a position. However, participants also provided justification for their identity performance unprompted as well. In some cases, this represented a way to give face to others like is described in facework theory (Domenici & Littlejohn, 2006). Jeep's statement that he seeks people out with differing identities, is

representative of him declaring that other people have worth and deserve to be recognized which is a face giving tactic. In other instances, participants provided justification for ignoring aspects of identity as a way to build mutual face. This is done by overlooking aspects of political identity because recognition of difference could result in conflict and thereby jeopardizing the relationship. However, in other case cases, this represented a response to a face threat. For example, Crosstrek was faced with the imposition of a viewpoint which she did not share which is a face threat. In order to maintain her identity, she changed the status of the relationship. However, the explanation that followed in the interview would also imply some type of a face threat or other need to build self-face.

The question remains: how do people use communication to negotiate between personal and political identities? This question seems to presuppose that someone's personal and political identities are discreet elements of identity. However, while they are informed by different needs and performed in different contexts, they are heavily interdependent on one another. With that in mind people are able to use facework to perform different aspects of their identity given the context. And these different aspects can include any combination of their personal and political identities.

### **Conclusion**

It is my hope that this study will serve as a steppingstone at the intersection of political science and communication studies. People are able to negotiate between their personal and political identities through a three-part process where first they identify aspects of identity to be performed, then they precede with their identity performance all while justifying their performance. This study provides support for Tracy and Trethewey's model of a crystalized identity (2005), where various facets of identity exist that are moved in and out of focus through

identity performance. This theory also adds to that model by adding an element of active co-creation of identity through the process of facework. This study does have significant limitations. Chief of those is the fact that data was collected in the midst of a pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, as such access to participants was limited to telecommuting and subject to their limited availability. Additionally, access to literature was limited to literature available in the digital realm. This study has significant potential for future research. Due to the presence of a pandemic, it would be fruitful to see what the results of this same study would be in the absence of one such pandemic. One potential future study would be more focused on how people are able to perform identities that are seemingly in conflict with one another.

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