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Identity and the Definition of the Situation
In a Mass-Mediated Contex

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> *The importance of identity and the definition of the situation for symbolic interactionist theory and research are discussed. These two concepts have been separated in much research since the 1970s, with identity being used in a variety of ways. This separation is partly attributed to paradigm shifts in social science, as well as to popular culture treatments of identity. Popular culture's emphasis on "collective" and "personal" identities is processed through entertainment formats that emphasize emotional and vicarious involvement, drama and action. Materials illustrate the presence of a mass-mediated generalized other, media communities, and the significance this has for realist and postrealist ethnography. Suggestions are offered for a reintegration of identity and the definition of the situation in ethnographic work.*

> *Sex videos are total fantasy. But people have to realize that even in a fantasy you have to deal with reality.*
> —Pornographic film actress

Identity has become a popular concept. The social relevance and meaning of identity has changed as a result of the popular culture industry recasting it as a resource for individuals to use in everyday life. A central concept of sociology and particularly symbolic interactionism, identity now cuts a wide atheoretical swath across various discourses. One result has been to sever identity from context, or the definition of the situation. Identity has changed along the lines suggested by Zurcher (1977, 1986) and Gergen (1991): it is more negotiated than institutionally grounded, particularly among younger people, but the shift is consistent with popular culture emphases on individual consumption, style and performance, and success. Although other aspects certainly contributed to this change, for example, the promotion of political and social agendas, even these rely on popular culture's direct and indirect effects.

I wish to explore several aspects of the relationship of identity and the definition of the situation. The following pages suggest four things: (1) Symbolic interaction,

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and virtually any interpretive framework in social science, turns on a conceptual tie of identity and the definition of the situation; (2) the links between identity and the definition of the situation resonate in current debates about realist and postrealist ethnography; (3) identity has been separated from the definition of the situation; and (4) popular culture as content and social forms (especially as media formats) is part of the generalized other for many people and thereby contributes to everyday life, particularly the affirmation of more personal identities.

Social definitions matter. Consider the following:

> Mark Twain would scarcely recognize Missouri's modern-day riverboat casinos. They are more like buildings than vessels, connected to land by power cables, plumbing lines and data circuits. They never leave the dock; one doesn't have even engines. Many of them aren't directly on the Missouri or the Mississippi itself, but in shallow ponds filled with piped-in river water. In one case, water must be pumped uphill to keep the hull damp. The Missouri supreme court is looking closely at the definitions of things like river and boat. They have concluded that "areas where boats float can be man-made but must be contiguous to the surface stream."
>
> The problem, boat operators noted, is that actually cruising on a river can be dangerous due to river traffic, low bridges and swift currents. The compromise was that the Gaming Commission allows "two-hour 'cruises' in which the gang-planks are lifted but the boat goes nowhere. Passengers are free to step off the boats if they run out of chips, but they can't come back on board." *(Arizona Republic,* January 4, 1998, p. D3)

Social scientists, gamblers, and riverboat pilots share a social world defined by popular culture and entertainment formats. People are practical. People wanted gambling but did not want to change laws that permitted gambling only in certain places. So politics simply made the place they put the gambling casino a "boat." It did not matter if you had a river or if the boat floated. Voters made this sleight of hand, "boats in moats" (BIM), visible and affirmed it in November 1998. Gambling offered some financial support for social services, and so forth, so why rock the boat? I want to rock the boat and suggest that what has been happening with "identity" is akin to boats in moats. Symbolic dams have arisen that channel situated action, interrupt the rhythmic flow of social order, and water down identity.

Self, identity, and the definition of the situation are critical concepts for the investigation and analysis of social behavior. These concepts are joined in process and are not "merely parts," although we may treat them as such for purposes of analysis. Notwithstanding multiple definitions, many social scientists seem willing to accept the following: self—or the sense of a total and exclusive persona; identity—that part of the self by which we are known to others; and the definition of the situation— if people define things as real, they are real in their consequences (and multiple versions, traced in part by Merton [1995] to Epictetus, A.D. 110). Symbolic interactionist approaches to the definition of the situation tend to focus on the time, place, and manner of action, although some works clarify the origins of definitions, their enactment in interaction, and the consequences (Foote 1951). As McHugh (1968:12)

noted three decades ago, "In symbolic interaction a definition occurs by ha~ taken the role of the other or by adopting a group standpoint."

A critical point: identity is a social production and not an individual property. What one thinks of oneself may be relevant, but identity claims require others' concurrence. The comments below address some aspects of identity and the definition of the situation in order to provide a context for suggesting that they have become separated and the implications this has for social analysis.

THE DEFINITION OF THE SITUATION

All human sciences concerned with the role of meaning in human behavior implicitly or explicitly deal with identity and definitions of situations. The definition the situation constitutes any "perspective" that transcends the moment. It forms foundation for the analysis and framing of contextual assessments of social act whether cultural, organizational, or institutional. As Ornstein (1991:184), a psychologist, notes, "The main function of context is to provide a way of organizing information beforehand, therefore making it more memorable." Merton (1995) observes that a version of the "definition of the situation" has been reiterated for a spa some two thousand years by numerous historians and philosophers. More widely chronicled by social students as the work of W. I. Thomas and, before him, George Herbert Mead, Schopenhauer stated, "It is not what things objectively and actually are, but what they are for us and in our way of looking at them that makes us happy or unhappy" (cited in Merton 1995:383).

Social life is temporal, clocked by the rhythm of everyday life (Karp and Y 1993). Meanings, routines, relationships, expectations, norms, habits, and taken granted activity had an origin; that origin, many studies suggest, is often a marked point of conflict, even violence. Waller put it this way:

> Many persons living together in a common group life for many overlapping generations have mapped out clearly the limitations of behavior inherent in the social situations most common in their culture. From their experience has arisen a consensus concerning what is and what is not thinkable in those situations. From these situations as they have been defined have been generalized certain group products which have in turn become important conditions of life in that group. We may refer to these group products as definitions of situations. (1961:162)

Both classicists and symbolic interactionists suggest that ultimately new habits and routines appear (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Cooley 1922; Schutz 1967; the symbolic interaction of Mead [1962]). Social stability and change are recognized, explained, and resisted through symbolic communication. Blumer locates this position within the work of Mead:

> Fundamentally, group action takes the form of a fitting together of individual lines of action. Each individual aligns his action to the actions of others by ascertaining what they are doing or what they intend to do—that is, by getting the meaning of their acts. For Mead, this is done by the individual "taking the role of others"— either the role of a specific person or the role of a group (Mead's "generalized

other"). In taking such roles the individual seeks to ascertain the intention or direction of the acts of others. He forms and aligns his own action on the basis of such interpretations of the acts of others. This is the fundamental way in which group action takes place in human society. (1962:184)

Much of our theory asserts that we exist as social beings in the midst of process. We do not "have" or own an "identity," but rather, identity emerges and is acknowledged in situations; we live in the identity process. Stone's statement is eloquent:

Almost all writers using the term imply that identity establishes what and where the person is in social terms. It is not a substitute word for 'self.' Instead, when one has identity, he is *situated-—that* is, cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgement of his participation or membership *place* in social relations. One's identity is established when others *place* him as a social object by assigning the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or *announces.* It is in the coincidence of placements and announcements that identity becomes a meaning of the self. (1962:93)

Research from decades of ethnographic work reporting the relevance of identity the definition of the situation teaches that identities are more situated than substantial, constructed rather than objective, and reflexive of symbolic process perspectives that comprise the definition of the situation. Gross and Stone's (1964:3—4) elaboration of the relationship between embarrassment and identity Un-cores the situational aspect: "If identity *locates* the person in social terms, it follows that locations or spaces emerge as symbols of identity, since social relations are spatially distributed. Moreover . . . there must be a certain coherence between one's personal appearance and the setting in which he appears."

As suggested earlier, identity tells us "who" the actor is; conduct demonstrates to the audience. To be known as a certain kind of individual with various qualities crystallizes the essence of identity—how we are known to others. The process flying the three turns of communication and the human capacity to treat the self as an object essentially amounts to this: We "are" what they expect if we communicate recognition of the situation.

The controversies over the "definition of the situation" were among the major its of contention that led many social scientists to examine the constitutive features of language, including the search for "invariant properties" and other rules by which an actor's "first order constructs" played into social interaction. Ethnomethodologists and others criticized symbolic interaction for not explaining how individuals interpreted situations and what constitutes this interpretive process (e.g., Douglas D; McHugh 1968). Such issues formed the conceptual foundation for a heightened awareness of reflexivity and its implications for developing a social science. Perhaps because of the conceptual morass that stunted significant movement beyond communication properties to social institutions, few social scientists examined definition of the situation after the 1970s. Perinbanayagam (1974) did suggest, however, that Mend's position was compatible with the dramaturgical solution to

the definition of the situation, whereby actors communicated their intentions and thoughts to others.

The significance of the definition of the situation for social behavior had implications for understanding power and justice in social life. Wailer's explication is very basic and thorough:

> Strictly speaking, the definition of the situation is a process. It is the process in which the individual explores the behavior possibilities of a situation, marking out particularly the limitations which the situation imposes upon his behavior with the final result that the individual forms an attitude toward the situation, or, more exactly, in the situation. . . . But because one person can greatly affect the definition of the situation which another arrives at, we are accustomed to say that one person defines a situation for another. (Stone and Farberman 1970:162)

From this slant, *power is the ability to define a situation for self and others.* Hence others more or less accept the powerful person's or group's definition. The way in which context and "history" informed the actors' definitions and strategies for effective interaction led others to articulate how context was brought to bear. The situation is more temporal than spatial, and it usually involves more than just "now" but rather a *context* of other experiences and assumptions that all actors bring to bear in defining "what we have here." Numerous examples could be cited, but one of the most compelling is Hughes's (1945) distinction between master and auxiliary status traits. The former "tends to overpower, in most crucial situations, any other characteristics which may run counter to it" (p. *353).* Master statuses, for example, race, gender, ex-convict, may be perceived to be accompanied by additional (auxiliary status) characteristics, for example, poor, male, unintelligent. Stereotyping permits treating one as an indicator of the other, although social scientists have long noted actors' ability to resist strident labels. Some work, for example, suggests that actors effectively distinguish between personal identity (to oneself), social identity (to others), and even situated identity (each new situation) (Hewitt 1989, 1991). One or more of the origins, processes, adjustments, and consequences of social definitions are the subject matter of most social analysis. And it is the context, process, and reflexive character of definitions that can be explicated through various "standpoint" methodologies.

More recent work on the negotiated order (Hall and Spencer-Hall 1982; Maines 1982; Thomas 1984, 1993), interpretive interaction (Denzin 1997), and meta-power (Hall 1997) as well as emphases on "frames" and discourse suggest the complexities of defining the situation. In the interplay of process and structure, social definitions are emphasized by Hall's (1997:397) perspective on meta-power: "A view of social organization is offered that emphasizes relations among situations, linkages between consequences and conditions, and networks of collective activity across space and time."

The task of the ethnographer has been to describe the situations, contexts, and interaction orders within which individual actors presented selves and made claims that their audiences validated as relevant, appropriate, and meaningful. Virtually any ethnographer could cite Foote's discussion of the significance of context for identity:

> Establishment of one's own identity to oneself is as important in interaction as to establish it for the other. One's own identity in a situation is not absolutely given but is more or less problematic. .. . Labels are there, to be sure, but the important fact is what these labels mean in a unified definition of the situation embracing both parties. In abstraction one can consider statuses analytically, as the anthropologists do, but in action it is the unique concatenation of relevant statuses at this one time and place—in this *situation—which* constitutes identity. (1951:17; original emphasis)

The celebration of context, contingency, and how situations connect to structures runs through our narratives. I will return to address this critical issue concerning realist and postrealist ethnographies.

In brief, then, identity and the definition of the situation were conceptually joined, but the latter took precedence. Social definitions are key to the identity process, are reflected in meanings people bring to situations as well as in those that emerge. Good ethnography shows that members' assumptions provide a backdrop for expectations of appropriateness, as well as essential scripts to present and then assess. Virtually any ethnography illustrates the individual-society connection: individuals acting in specific situations see appropriate words and deeds reflected in symbolic communication from others (the mirror). This process is partially represented in Figure 1. What is critical for social consequences, of course, is the source and nature of this interactive construction and affirmation that individuals are given identities through symbolic meanings conveyed by particular others: rocket scientists and "gang bangers" are constituted through the process.

Snow and Anderson's (1993) study of "homeless people" (it won several scholarly awards, including the SSSI's Charles Horton Cooley Award in 1993)
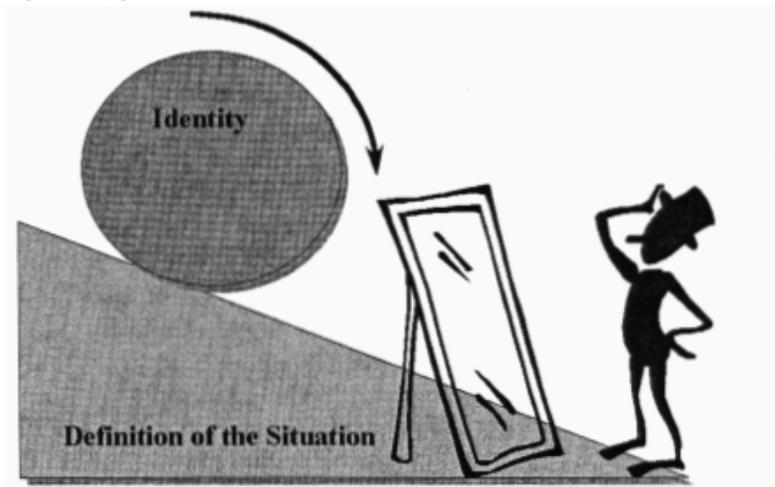
AUDIENCE

FIGURE 1. Classic relationship of identity and the definition
of the situation

exemplifies how identity is a feature of the definition of the situation yet reflexively shapes future definitions. Their work, like numerous ethnographies, belies claims by some critics that symbolic interaction and especially the investigation of the identity process cannot deal with power and "macro" issues. In their provocative chapter "Salvaging the Self," these researchers describe how different homeless people are implicated in two types of identities: those they refer to themselves and those attributed to them by others. Snow and Anderson delineate how homeless people assume these various identities, how personal identities and social identities are negotiated from situation to situation, and how they use certain strategies of "distancing" themselves from the discordant identities. Which identities are imputed—and accepted—is also a feature of their situation on the streets, including how long they have been there and their institutional support.

I have found it useful in using their work in my course "Justice and Everyday Life" to contrast the definitional and identity process involving domiciled (non-street) people, recent arrivals, and long-term street residents, or outsiders. Some of these relationships are illustrated in Figure 2:

1. Identity: "personal identity," how one thinks of oneself, and "social identity," how one is thought of by others.

2. The nature and extent of deviance and the social interaction processes that constitute social control, embarrassment, and identity talk.

3. The "domiciled" and two extremes of the homeless—the "recently dislocated" and the hard-core "outsiders." These may be distinguished by context

Social Identity   Domiciled   Recently Dislocated   Outsiders

Life-Style Deviance

Social Control

Embarrass-ment/Shame

Identity Talk

Everyday Deviance
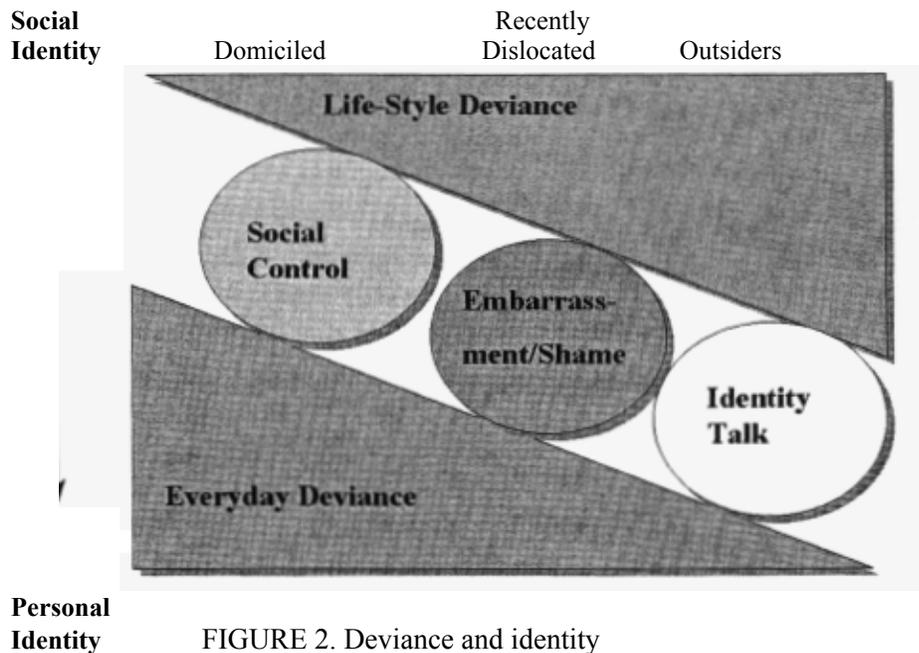
Personal Identity   FIGURE 2. Deviance and identity

and audience support for the politics of interaction, including the capacity to define a situation, to present themselves as a certain kind of person, and to have accounts and disclaimers of their situation honored.

The relationship between social identity and personal identity depends on social processes (social control, embarrassment/shame, and identity talk), and every-day deviance or lifestyle deviance reflects this relationship. In the case of home-lessness, understanding who those people are or why "those people do those things" necessitates learning about their different situations, for example, length of time on the streets or experiences with social agencies. Situations of homelessness change, and the homeless are part of that process. Initially, for example, simply getting a job, having a place to live, and having transportation may be enough to turn the tide for many homeless people. But this changes with time and numerous experiences, adjusted symbolic categories, and, above all, a reassessment of the self. After several years on the streets, identity changes, and what once may have worked to keep an individual off the streets, for example, a job, is no longer sufficient.

Taking the role of the other enhances the process of identity communication and interpretation. The other, in turn, grants symbolic recognition of the identity performance. In this sense, identity is constituted through the communication process. It remains contingent on the definition of the situation, yet it is much more. Identity means embodied enactment in an existential moment. A different awareness of an individual reflects an appreciation of the context. An actor who embodies, or "wears," the streets enables the sociological eye to focus and see the world that has been created and in turn is being created. The personal embodied experience is visceral and real, breathing first-order constructs, talking vocabularies of motive and courses of action, and suffering the consequences of excuses and justifications rendered by those in another part of the situation. Many standpoint methodologies, including those referred to as "postrealist" and "poststructuralist" draw on the rich experiences, ambiguities, and personas as text for readers familiar with various contexts to give their own interpretation, their own reading of the data.

IDENTITY:FROM TOPIC TO RESOURCE

I suggest that *identity as a topic,* as something to be examined in its own right, has been usurped by *identity as a resource,* or an implied part of another agenda or focus (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). With the former, social scientists focused on the interaction process producing identity and the consequences for social action. The emphasis was on what people experience from others about themselves in the course of social interaction (Goffman 1963; McCall and Simmons 1978). Snow and Anderson (1993:213—14) suggest that individuals may claim a personal identity that differs from social identity: "When individuals claim or assert an identity ... they attribute meaning to themselves ... [as] self-designations brought into play or avowed during the course of actual or anticipated interaction with others."

Firmly embedded in social psychology as a *topic* and a process, identity is to a ledger of issues involving social interaction, for example, groups, activities, me ,definition of the situation, situated and negotiated order. While these salient concepts of symbolic interaction have become common place throughout social science as the dominant perspectives and orientations to action, they have also become widely adapted by those who would prefer to use identity as a resource. The mass media and the popular culture industry, as well as the impressive incorporation of information technology into everyday life, have been most attentive to the discoveries and renderings of a social psychology infused with interactionist concepts—albeit in less than pristine form. We face, then, a question of success, particularly the alternative identity offers to nonessentialist perspectives: *What happens to our perspectives in studying social life when the social world has incorporated some of the key vocabulary and perspective?* At this point, *identity as a resource* is most apparent.

Identity and the definition of the situation appear to be trendy. Identity has been appropriated by a wide range of users, most of whom sever it from the definition the situation. A meta-analysis by Cerulo (1997) of publications on identity show that before 1970 these works centered on the formation of the "me," "exploring how interpersonal interactions mold an individual's sense of self" (p. 386). Consistent with the deemphasis of the definition of the situation, work on identity shifted after 1970 from an actor in interaction producing identity to the collective origins of identity. Cerulo (1997:386) cites three trends that influenced the direction of identity studies: (1) social and nationalist movements of the past three decades shifted scholarly attention to issues of group agency and political action, particularly status politics including gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class; (2) intellectual concerns with agency and self-direction promoted interest in the creation, maintenance, and change of boundaries; and (3) new communication technologies prompted examination of interaction at a distance, including the potential for an expansive cyber-based generalized other. My main focus is on the third point.

The significance of the mass media and information technology for identity, social definitions, and an expanded generalized other has several implications symbolic interaction theory and methodological challenges involving realist postrealist standpoints. First, as suggested by Shalin (1993), our understanding mass media images and logic can benefit from insights provided by cultural studies and postmodern orientations. Second, if media images and logic contribute to generalized other, a renewed and better-informed analytical eye for "seeing" "interpreting" media-related activities, styles, and logic may be in order. Third, I suggest that an expanding array of "media communities" model social interact similar to "speech communities" described by Scott and Lyman (1968:62). Fourth, postrealist and standpoint methodologies may be more sensitive to in-depth probes of the actors' perspectives, identity foundations, and presentations. These points resonate through changing uses and characteristics of identity.

The nature and process of identity and its contextual embeddedness in

emergent situations received less emphasis during the 1980s and 1990s. Identity has been appropriated as an aspect and outcome of the socialization process, and as a critical feature of the social construction of reality. Cerulo (1997:385) noted that postmodern researchers have focused on identity as a text, prioritizing discourse over observations of behavior, and "approach identity as a source of mobilization rather than a product of it."

These uses of identity as membership and belonging are strategic rather than substantive and suggest an "identity for change" orientation not unlike efforts to promote a group and issue-specific collective identity. Consistent with social constructionist and nonessentialist perspectives on identity, the relevance of an obdurate "social reality" was implicitly challenged by celebrating the arbitrary and constructed nature of all perspectives while positing the legitimacy of some over others. It was as though an understanding of the process of constructing social reality could be used to build one! The problem, of course, was context, or the existence and sociological foundation of contested frames of legitimacy. This postrealist approach includes examining virtual identities wherein the definition of the situation is less problematic, partly due to rules of communication formats.

As the author of a recent analysis of online discussion notes, "Most of the interaction among BlueSky participants occurs online. But by seeking to meet one another, and to gain face-to-face information about their online contacts, they reconnect identity to the body" (Kendall 1998:136).

POPULAR CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Mass media and popular culture contribute to the definition of situations in social life. I aim to suggest ways in which this process informs the generalized other for some actors, as well as to demonstrate that the media perspectives inform certain situations and subsequent definitions. We can describe the process even if the precise moment of individual impact cannot be established for millions of people. The experiential foundations of the identity process have always included communication opportunities, styles, and competence. Scholars usually assumed that process involved face-to-face communication, which remains its ultimate foundation. However, numerous works now document how pervasive information technology alters "social space" by providing access to a diversity of content rich in potential meaning and to communication formats for the selection, organization, and presentation of information (e.g., Altheide 1985, 1995; Beniger 1987; Cerulo, Ruane, and Chayko 1992; Meyrowitz 1985).

Symbolic interactionists have noted the changing character of identity. Identity appears throughout a wide range of conversation, academic discourse, the nightly news, and a plethora of talk shows. More is involved than the "mutable self" that Zurcher (1977) describes, or the "media self" discussed in previous work (Altheide 1984). Karp and Yoels's (1993:343—44) "postmodern self," which inhabits a world requiring "[redefining] ourselves in *relational* rather than individualistic terms," cap-

tures widespread images of popular culture. The entertainment format provides a common ground that the advertising industry essentially owns and operates. As suggested by Snow's (1983) analysis of "media culture," the entertainment format emphasizes first, an absence of the ordinary; second, the openness of an adventure, outside the boundaries of routine behavior; and third, a suspension of disbelief by the audience member. In addition, although the exact outcome may be in doubt, there is a clear and unambiguous point at which it will be resolved. Packaging such emphases within dramatic formats (visual, brief, and action oriented) produces an exciting and familiar tempo to audiences. Moreover, as audiences spend more time with these formats, the logic of advertising, entertainment, and popular culture becomes taken for granted as a "normal form" of communication.

MEDIA COMMUNITIES

Popular culture plays a significant role in shaping audience expectations and criteria for self-presentations for themselves and others (e.g., as audience members). As Couch (1995) proclaimed several years ago, evocative rather than referential forms of communication now dominate the meaning landscape. The referential forms fall before the electrified rolling formats that change everyday life with the look and swagger of persona, entertainment, and action.

Paraphrasing Scott and Lyman's (1968) lucid description of speech communities, I suggest that "media communities" emerge that define appropriate identities, roles, language, and styles for their members. They are reflexive of previous role performances yet directive of future identity affirmations. When age-graded audiences pass cultural rites of passage, the media community persists, albeit in recycled forms that in turn direct future preferences and performances that look, sound, and feel right. Like the Eagles' fabled song, "Hotel California," one can check out of a community but never leave.

The presentation of self has changed drastically. The key conceptual tie for identity and the definition of the situation is the generalized other, but the media provide numerous others. When both actor and audience have at least one foot in popular culture, they hold shared meanings for validating the actor's performance. Actors still want to present a self, but the time, place, and manner in which they do it have been fundamentally altered by new awareness contexts stressing more evocative and "present" orientations rather than consequential and future ones. The following example showed up on an e-mail list serve devoted, I thought, to discussions of media ecology.

> Just received confirmation yesterday that CSPAN will definitely be taping my talk at Borders in New York City….
>
> The talk will be on—what else?—my new book...
>   The talk will be from 6 PM to about 7:30 PM, and will include q & a with the audience.... It will be aired on CSPAN2's "About Books," which shows Saturdays 8PM PT/ET (replayed Sundays 9PM PT/ET)….

> Cameras show the audience filing in, milling around after the event, as well as during the q & a—so whoever shows up, hey, here's a chance for some national TV exposure!
>
> And I promise to call upon anyone by name who asks a question (and by all means feel free to mention your own work in your question!)
>
> ....We already have commitments from several media people *(NY Times* reporters), science fiction writers, etc—so who knows who you may end up sitting next to.

The line between strategic and spontaneous interaction blurs when both are part of an action-packed foreground of character display and discovery residing in media communities. When scripts and styles of popular culture become ours for the purpose at hand, then audiences become players. Indeed, strong atheoretical statements by casual observers carry metaphors away in search of any data.

> Everywhere the fabricated, the inauthentic and the theatrical have gradually driven out the natural, the genuine and the spontaneous until there is no distinction between real life and stagecraft. In fact, one could argue that the theatricalization of American life is the major cultural transformation of this century. Devoured by artifice, life is a movie. (Gabler 1998)

Identity is contextualized and produced in a symbolic environment shared by other actors. The rise of popular culture, particularly of mediated communicated formats that infuse everyday life, including architecture, entertainment, prayer, play, and work, adds a dimension to the effective environment—the physical and symbolic environment we experience and share on an everyday basis (e.g., Grodin and Lindlof 1996). This dimension exists more temporally than spatially; it resides in increasingly portable, fast, and, above all, chic, valued, stylish mediated interaction (Meyrowitz 1985).

Identity as a feature of mass media and popular culture increasingly is presented as a product and a *resource* to be used and marketed as a thing and an adjective, for example, "identity politics." Advertising pushes products, not processes; identity has been gradually transformed from being an "esoteric" social science *process* to a mass-mediated and readily available *product* (Zurcher 1986). (Recalling the earlier discussion of BIM may raise the question of philosophy or orientation of public policy. Well, advertising has answered: "Philosophy" is "a collection of skin care products created especially for the enlightened man," including "the great awakening— oxygen exfoliation treatment," and "the afterglow—oil-free smoothing gel." Both are available at Saks Fifth Avenue.)

The mass media promote identity as a resource to satisfy individually oriented needs and interests to "be whomever you want," as the above example of virtual identity suggests. It resembles the category "personal identity" several social scientists have identified (e.g., Hewitt 1991; Snow and Anderson 1993). Popular culture's emphasis on entertainment and commodification of the self informs this emphasis. Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney (1998:206) agree with numerous researchers who have documented the impact of media logic on everyday life: "Ultimately the media's

ability to produce people's social identities, in terms of both a sense of unity and difference, may be their most powerful and important effect."

In the temporal order of popular culture, the present can be projected into future belonging and acceptance via the market, especially cultural styles. Popular culture is lived through participation. Identity is an accomplishment of interaction with the broader market/context rather than merely one's peers, who are likely to promote the diverse range of popular culture trends and guidelines to capture the largest possible market. The impetus for change and identity formation rests on acting, presentation of self, and conduct consistent with products widely shared by fellow consumers, who comprise the legitimating audience for one's performance.

With the merchandising of products there emerged the skillfully crass connection of marketing identities-as-products, but also identities-for-products. Self-promotion through proclamation and purchase has been around for a long time. But getting to be someone who belonged or "deserved" to be in the same picture (frame and screen) with a product closely aligned with status and acceptability became high art. And great commercials.

> Implicit in the very notion of the audience as consumers operating in a market is the need to continually make people think of themselves as consumers . . . to help construct a consumer society by encouraging people to locate their identity in their leisure tastes and consumer practices rather than in other roles such as jobs and churches. The ideological message is that what we buy says more about who we are than other facts, including where we get the money. Media programs and advertising are all about this redefinition of self-identity. (Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney 1998:212)

Three things happen in a media age in which identities and products are marketed interchangeably and synergistically. First, we experience them in the same time, place, and manner. Second, the product and process are reflexive—the product is the identity. Identity appears explicitly and implicitly in numerous advertisements. Third, media images "loop" (Manning 1998) through various media and messages, moving, for example, from initial claim to established fact to background information to standard. Product labels as key membership categories are a triumph for popular culture and mass mediation. And the freedom to purchase and "become" a member—and participant—reflects the actor's individual freedom and decision making. Social interaction with peers begins to reflect and turn on such familiarity.

We consider several points when assessing the process and extent to which popular culture and communication formats contribute to the changing face of identity. First is the massive involvement with media and the gamut of popular culture in the United States and many other Western countries. Whether measured in terms of hours viewing television, or movie attendance, or music and compact disc purchases, or popular brands of clothing, the experience, while far from uniform in our pluralistic society, is enormous (see Comstock 1980). Second, popular culture affords individuals a plethora of styles, personas, and potential role models. Third, popular culture audiences are also participants, albeit in varying degrees. Fourth, the physical

and symbolic environment reflects media culture as theme parks, theme cities, and shopping malls, and even wars adopt media forms. Fifth, the criteria and frameworks for authenticity, credibility, competence, and acceptability can be widely shared and indeed taken for granted as audiences interact in this media context.

The entertainment format of the mass media promotes personal identity for collective membership (e.g., causes), or for individual preferences. Although advocates promote "status" and "identity politics," opinion polls and other indicators suggest that the majority of Americans do not regard ascribed status and accompanying social identities as highly significant in their life chances. Studies by Zurcher (1977, 1986) as well as our use of the Twenty Statements Test (TST) reveals major shifts toward "physical" and "reflective" self and immediate individual preferences over group memberships and status characteristics. For example, the TST with university students produces more individual, personal terms than relational ones. Indeed, ascribed status characteristics are infrequently mentioned (field notes; John Johnson, personal communication).

Self and especially identity became separated from the definition of the situation in the extraordinary contexts of popular culture. Popular culture provides the overriding context and definition, particularly for the age group most fully enmeshed in mass-mediated experience—youth! Popular culture and information technology have influenced the arena for identity and social definitions in two fundamental ways: they opened a wide range of experiences, models, and scenarios from which people can draw; and they added unique communication formats and interaction styles, both temporally and norm referenced to the "original score." For example, video games (e.g., Snowboarding) now incorporate advertising (e.g., Butterfinger candy bar) in their formats.

As suggested in Figure 3, these formats and interaction styles enter the popular culture via the mass media but also through repeated discussion and practice. Identity exists in interaction. But situations have changed. Media communities and audiences are more temporally located than place bound; experiencing "it" even when they can't tell you where or when they "saw it." Style involves successful enactment of ambiguous roles involving popular culture awareness, preference, and participation. Context is temporally limited to a scenario that helps to define a situation: identity is affirmed by those familiar with the format and vocabulary of motives.

Television is one broad example of a media form that expands our views on identity and social definitions. Products seek television shows to be used, not only as advertisement, but as part of the context that surrounds the action. Consider the way Apple Computers works with more than a dozen prime-time programs to have its products featured in the action itself, not just in advertisements. When it was reported that Apple dominates most youth-oriented shows, an advertising coordinator for the company explained, "One of the things I hear is that the Apple brand really says something about a character: more hip, more innovative" *(Newsweek,* November 30, 1998, p. *58).* The line between the TV screen and one's own living room
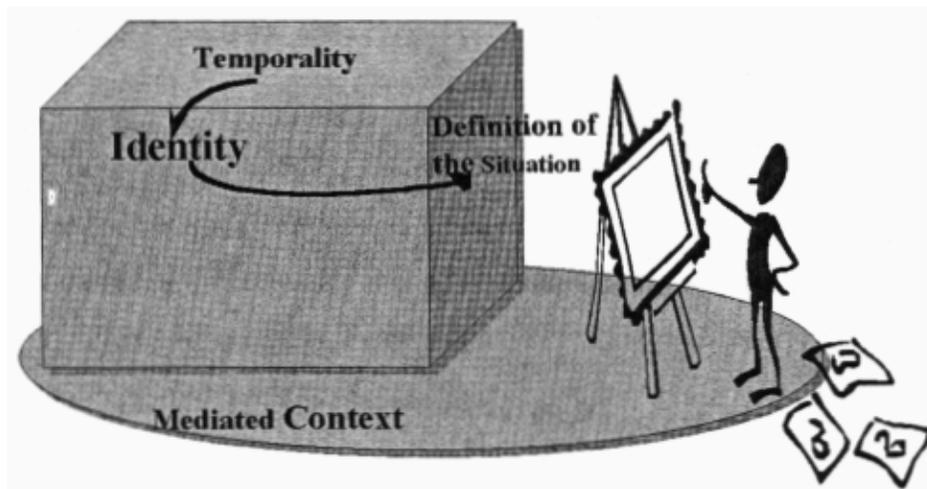
FIGURE 3. Contemporary relationship of definition of the situation

vanishes: when the TV set is in your living room, the Apple computer is just "here." All viewers become participants in this mediated experience. When characters, products, and mediated reality are reflexive, the grounding for social action merges with the communication formats about time, place, and manner. This merging permits bracketing of the past, and the context may be bracketed for the current performance.

Being part of the action is critical in popular culture. Involvement with emergent communication formats illustrates the process. Fans are the outliers, but they may reflect the underlying process. Consider the popularity of the *Star Trek* movies.

> Len Williamson and his wife recently traveled from Phoenix to Las Vegas to participate in Star Trek—The Experience. One of 4,000 Trekkers who paid as much as $100 to take part in the grand opening for fans, Williamson joins others dressed as Romulan and Bajorans, while some come as tourists. Williamson is dressed in his homemade Klingon outfit, which includes makeup, chain-mail sash, copper-trimmed jacket and combat boots. He awoke at 5 a.m., making sure he had plenty of time for his 45-minute transformation from middle-aged fan to Klingon warrior. *(Arizona Republic,* January 21, 1998, p. Cl)

Being a participant takes different forms. When it was announced that the prequels to *Star Wars* would be "previewed" in two-minute teasers at seventy-five theaters across the United States in November 1998, thousands of people paid $9 to attend, and an estimated one-third did not stay to see the main feature.

> About a third of the 500-person audience opted to not make Joe Black's acquaintance, but walked out, buzzing excitedly, after the preview faded. Some planned to play videogames in the lobby, then return to their seats for the post-show screening. . . . Similar scenes played out at theaters across the country. *(Newsweek,* November 30, 1998, p. 84)

The Internet provides another example of an apparently absurd transformation that invites serious speculation. Originated by the military, the Internet now serves as a forum for soul cleansing. Bishop Desmond Tutu's truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa gave "individual, white South Africans an opportunity to apologize to their black countrymen for the iniquities of apartheid, via the Internet. In line with the bishop's belief that acts of contrition are good for the soul of the 'rainbow nation,' the commission ... created a cyberspace confession box" (http:// www.truth.org.za). One message online: "I am sorry for being a racist during the apartheid years" *(Arizona Republic,* January 4, 1998, p. A25).

The consequence of mass-mediated experience is ubiquitous, pervasive, and total. It affects the process and style of interaction, language use, and structure of accounts. As part of the context for social life, mediated experience shifts expectations and preferences away from a more static and spatial orientation toward a more temporal one. This process has intensified as our culture has become more visual, aided by an expansive popular culture and information technology that promotes "seeing" over reading and hearing.

Participation in media communities promotes identity for audiences who become players in pursuing fun and games but also good deeds. Entertainment formats define situations, and audiences become actors as the distinction between fantasy and reality disappears. Consider the following whale of a tale.

Keiko, an orca, starred in a 1992 Warner Brothers movie, *Free Willy,* about an abused whale who is freed by a young boy, despite the plotting of an unscrupulous amusement park owner. When *Life* magazine published a story that criticized Keiko's living conditions in Mexico, the film producers and others took steps to improve the situation, culminating in moving Keiko to Newport, Oregon. Schoolchildren, private donors, scientific institutes, and, of course, Warner Brothers embarked on a fund-raising drive to build a new home for Keiko in Oregon and to pay for airmailing the four-ton whale there. (He has since made the round-trip from Iceland to Ontario to Mexico City to Oregon to Iceland). In July 1995 Warner Brothers released *Free Willy 2: The Adventure Home,* which sold 6 million copies, each one with an appeal to help Keiko. An estimated 1.2 million children called an 800 number to help pay the $7.5 million bill for Keiko's new home. With several hundred thousand tourists visiting Keiko's rehabilitation site in Oregon, the Free Willy Keiko Foundation initiated Web sites to provide updates and to bolster fund-raising. *USA Today* reported:

> Schoolchildren in Iceland will participate in reception ceremonies. Keiko "will be warmly welcomed when he comes to Iceland," Prime Minister David Oddsson says. But he acknowledges some skepticism among Icelanders. Millions of dollars are being spent on Keiko, he notes, when "there are a lot of whales swimming around this country."...

> A child reflected about the 21 year old Orca which had been away from "home" for 21 years: I think it's great because he's going home," says Joanna Walker, 10, a fifth-grader from Silverton, Ore., who was one of thousands of children at the Aquarium this week for a last visit with Keiko. "But it's sad because he's been such a great orca." (September 4, 1998, p. 1OA)

Names have always mattered, but when identity becomes separated from the definition of the situation, naming becomes reality with consequences. The administrators at the Phoenix Zoo recognized this several years ago when they decided to have their elephant, Ruby, "paint." With TV cameras rolling and paintbrush in trunk, Ruby would splash paint on a huge piece of paper. Such artistry earned the zoo at least $200,000 over a period of several years. But Ruby's career ended when she required surgery to save her life after her unborn calf died. Ruby died despite the efforts of a team of surgeons that few humans could command. Candlelight vigils, small children sobbing, and front page coverage of children's pachyderm poems bracketed Ruby's surgery and death. On a day to "remember Ruby," more than forty thousand people took advantage of the "free admission" to visit the zoo. Not only did her passing achieve the major goal of attracting massive local, national, and international news coverage, it further transformed the identity of Ruby into a teacher. One New York artist is helping to establish three elephant art schools in Thailand, where elephant work is in less demand today. He stated, "Founders of great movements often die very young, like Jesus Christ, van Gogh, and now Ruby. ... This is a tragedy—Ruby is the greatest of heroes. Just as Jesus was remembered from Palestine, Ruby will be remembered from Phoenix" *(The Tribune,* November 13,1998, p. Al).

Other denizens of Phoenix shared the sentiment, and verbally attacked two *Arizona Republic* journalists—one a political cartoonist—for making rough comparisons with fallen politicians (e.g., Newt Gingrich) and for drawing attention to the hypocrisy of a company that donated mattresses for Ruby's surgery. Letters to the editor in the November 14 *Arizona Republic* illustrate the sentiment:

> I can't believe you let Benson (the cartoonist) put in a "comic" that relates very emotional for so many Arizonans. . . . I hope there aren't any children who will witness this and think the death of an animal is something to be made fun of, especially when an offspring is involved....

> ….It was apparent by observing the media attention that most of us in the Valley were deeply saddened by the loss of a proud and stately creature such as Ruby the elephant. . . . Then in one swift stroke of a pen, with no conscience, no respect, just indifference and the immaturity of an oft juvenile 'mind, Mr. Benson
> ….again succeeds at minimizing the memories of those that grieve through the exploitation of a disturbing image.

And,

> I am an employee of Sleep America, the company that donated mattresses to the Phoenix Zoo to help in the recovery of the sick elephant, Ruby. E.J. Montini *[Republic* columnist] implied in his Nov. 5 column that Sleep America is more willing to help Ruby than humans in need. . . . Our company president . .. confirmed that Sleep America would donate two new mattresses if donated ones couldn't be found. Fortunately, two used mattresses were acquired in time. . . Mr. Montini should do his homework before misleading readers that Sleep America is willing to give to an elephant before sharing with those less fortunate.

Thus, whales and elephants are transformed into characters with names playing roles orchestrated to appeal to children, and then to parents and other adults who are urged to take action to help children. Good deeds happen and millions of dollars are spent. However, an unintended consequence results: a script is readied for emboldened authors of future action to play out that celebrates mass media definitions and personal identity as "helping." When we can buy videotapes, call 800 numbers, and say good-bye to animals, we can also vote and comment on the politics of identity.

BEYOND THE ZOO

Politics are participatory these days. We "know" the candidates-as-characters-and-types. Audiences participate through the recognition and application of appropriate timing, logic, and behavior. "Handlers" groom candidates, not coincidentally, to fit profiles of audience's perceptions and preferences (see Hall 1979). Jesse (the Body) Ventura's election as governor of Minnesota in 1998 bewildered pundits and left them in considerable disarray. A large man well known to wrestling fans, Ventura was the visual—if not the social—antithesis of most politicians. He supported medical use of marijuana and carrying concealed weapons (with training) and opposed education and social benefits for "illegal immigrants" and lower taxes. A conservative with a social conscience, some people said. But it wasn't primarily the issues. It was his ability to wear the issues on charismatic shoulders last seen hurtling chairs and bodies through the air in a cartoonlike wrestling arena. With nearly 60 percent of the electorate voting, the words of many young supporters may explain his appeal: "He's cool!" Carrying virtually every age group under sixty, across all but the highest income levels (over $100,000), supporters appear to have liked the antihero for many reasons, among them the fact that, in the words of some, "he's honest." In addition, Ventura used the Internet to coordinate a small army of volunteers to get out the vote, an effective strategy in Minnesota, where last-minute voters can register on-site. When trying to capture why the people elected Ventura and thus rejected the pundits' and newspaper editors' advice, one *Star Tribune* columnist wrote:

> And in the process, they wasted the DFL Party, the Republican Party, the *Star Tribune* and all the experts and pundits who said it could not (and should not) ever happen. And it wasn't because Jesse was a celebrity or Jesse was an entertainer. It was because he wasn't Norm from the right, and he wasn't Skip from the left. He was Jesse from the North. (November 7, 1998, A19)

Jesse and another politician, President Bill Clinton, serve as mere content for powerful popular culture forms that reflectively direct experience with the social world. Entertainment formats that dominate an expansive information technology promote an evocative environment. A change in information technology facilitated the transformation of President Clinton's private predilection into public sexual predicament in 1998. The media that produced the messages of sex play at work turned on the recent advent of the Internet, "adult discretion" television programming, and video technology.

A report by a Special Prosecutor, who had sought Clinton's head for more than four years, focused in vivid detail on the sexual encounters rather than the highly referential and complex issues surrounding investigation of other alleged misdeeds, for example, the land and banking Gordian knot that came to be known as Whitewater. The Special Prosecutor spent more than $40 million but failed to gather evidence to make the charges on Whitewater stick. Regardless, audiences lacked the expertise to visualize financial transactions that challenged several teams of accountants. Not so with fellatio, thong underwear, and phone sex. How many papers would have printed the entire Starr report if it had focused on Whitewater instead of sex, and contained the same allegations about perjury, witness tampering, and obstruction of justice? Numerous journalists, including James Shelledy, editor of the *Salt Lake Tribune,* shared a clear answer: "Those issues, we are told, are the reasons we're supposed to be excited about all this, which is utter bullshit. Sex has driven this from the start. Sex and the Beltway's [Washington, D.C.'s} obsession with scandal" (Hickey 1998:31).

This prosecutor, like law enforcement and prosecution across the country, combined entertainment media formats with official investigations and, thus, added yet another stage to "gonzo justice" (Altheide 1992). With the focus on sexual materials and descriptive testimony about who did what to whom and with what effect, the Internet disseminated "pornography" from high places on the same day that the House committee received the Starr Report. (Some "net browsers" could not access pornography-as-evidence because cyber gatekeepers censored certain words and phrases and would not allow it!)

Numerous press reports, talk shows, and newspaper accounts pushed the words and deeds on millions of citizens. Comedians had a field day, although a few cartoonists opined that the subtlety essential for their work was missing from the vivid detail. Next would come the president's videotaped testimony to a Grand Jury, explaining and dissembling the meaning of "sex" and whether both parties would necessarily be "having sex" if "the deponent" was merely a recipient, having had sex done unto him. Boats in moats! And like BIM, the voters did not care: even if the riverboats aren't, let them float gambling anyway. Even if the president had sex with an intern and lied about it, let it pass. The entire scenario created a "program," a real-life sitcom wherein the nation's leaders and major media focused on the stuff of a half dozen daytime "soaps," in the midst of the ubiquitous terror and horror throughout the world. Notwithstanding the president's Baptist tradition that limited "sex" to "the real thing," the country howled at his definition of the situation, and the fact that he had been caught with his pants down. Citizens heard discussions and participated in them with friends and relatives, then rendered their own verdicts and opinions about whether sex was that important anyway, and is getting a blow job sex? But it also made Clinton appear to be as common as a third of the married couples in the United States who acknowledged lying about affairs. Audiences provided their own context of meaning, drawing on their own experiences and the now-institutionalized definitions involving marital infidelity, particularly

oral sex with a young woman. People laughed. And the president's popularity rating soared. Still, as missiles fell on Iraq (again), the House of Representatives impeached him.

Entertainment formats laundered the scandal and took the sting out of it by putting it in the context of popular culture topics. When "everyone" knew about it, accepted the absurdity of it all, and, most important, laughed and told jokes, the meaning had clearly changed. It was a good program. And programming benefited. The entertainment formats had been opened further to include presidential pornography. Comparing the use of the term "oral sex" on ABC News and in major newspapers before and after the revelations about "Clinton and Monica" shows a 300 percent increase (9—39) for ABC News and an increase of 120 percent (1,769—3,925) for major American newspapers. The more liberal use of sexually explicit terms in the mushrooming array of TV info-tainment "real TV" and talk programs, along with a continued broadening of the censorship spectrum for radio, provides a rich environment for more explicit popular culture.

Ruby, Jesse, and the president, then, illustrate identity that is strong in the context of evocative formats. Popular culture as content and form offered not only another reality but also the communication formats through which popular culture lives became more tied to "reality," albeit in varying degrees. Identity came to be preferred, ripped free of conventional everyday life contexts that fueled its direction and development.

As popular culture grew and became more intertwined with "normal" life, another context of meaning emerged that permitted social participation in vicarious experiences. Identity increasingly became something with which to play—like a toy. This discovery did not escape an expanding economy, blossoming markets, and an awesome information technology, which, through miniaturization and speed, fundamentally laughed at previous spatial boundaries of the self. Identity still needed interaction, but that could be found in different dimensions, some without consequence.

Popular culture promotes characters and roles over people. Research on the use of "toys" in American life can illustrate the shifting relevance of identity. Play and politics are no longer separate when they are filtered through a mediated environment. Barbie Dolls can now be personalized as "My Design Barbie." On realizing that the typical American girl between the age of three and eleven owns ten Barbies— up from only one in the early 1980s (adults own more than half a million)—Mattel offered a Web page (http://www.Barbie.com) where custom-designed Barbies could be ordered. A Mattel spokesperson suggested, "It's about fantasy and dreaming ... and the fun of seeing ourselves in plastic perfection." As a *Newsweek* report put it:

> In her 39-year existence, Barbie has been a surgeon, a TV news reporter, a veter-
> inarian, a firefighter, a paleontologist, a rock star and a presidential candidate.
> Nearly 20 years before Sally Ride blasted off, Barbie was already an astronaut.
> But now she can have the most glamorous identity of all: starting this month,
> Barbie can be . . . you. (November 16, 1998, p. 14)

Best's (1998) analysis of toys noted how claims makers rather than children seek to promote their own interests by defining situations of play. Best cogently asks, who are toys for, and more important, who uses toys? After chronicling numerous instances of ideological infusion into discussions of toys, Best cautions:

> In other words, material culture's meanings must evolve through social interaction, and, if sociologists hope to understand those meanings, they cannot merely read the object as a text. Such readings, whether by entrepreneurs projecting a market for a new product, intellectuals envisioning future impacts of innovations, or claimsmakers denouncing troublesome toys, ignore the people who construct the object's meanings. ... In the case of toys, those actors include manufacturers and distributors, and the people who select and purchase toys, but especially the children who play with them. Toys do not embody violence or sexism or occult meanings. People must assign toys their meanings. (1998:208)

But interest in toys spreads beyond their use by children and claims makers. Toys are part of the adult's market orientation, and they increasingly approach them with future payoffs in mind, even if it means using their children to get them. Consider Beanie Babies, the popular small cloth dolls and caricatures that became collector's items. Initially developed by Ty Warner in 1993, Beanie Babies were marketed as "inexpensive toys for children, a cute friend for *$5* a pop" *(Arizona Republic,* June 29, 1998, p. C2). Following an announcement that a few would be "retired," their value increased, notwithstanding the distribution of some 100 million by McDonald's. Later a McDonald's advertising campaign caught hold of the "Beanie craze," leading people to purchase Happy Meals just for the Beanies— then throw away the food. Others sought employment with McDonald's in order to "be there when they come in" *(Arizona Republic,* June 29, 1998, p. C2). At one point fans lined up hours before a ball game to get a "Hissie" Beanie Baby, hoping to capitalize on its investment potential. A twelve-year-old boy said, "I'm going to save them and put them in my showcase," and his mother said, "I'm hoping it will eventually pay for his education someday." A twelve-year-old girl said, "Like back when my dad grew up, people were used to playing with their toys. But nowadays you don't usually get to play with toys" *(Arizona Republic,* June 15, 1998, p. Al).

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE

Realist and postrealist ethnography may benefit from an increased awareness of the separation of identity from the definition of the situation. Putting action in context is critical, but what if the people involved are unaware of certain contexts and reflect the "realities" of popular culture? In particular, how important is it for ethnographers to be aware of hyper-media, popular culture, and media communities? How can we study individuals and social settings when critical concepts that social scientists routinely employ may not apply in settings devoid of apparent context?

As researchers armed with diverse epistemological canons approach social life with an eye on identity and the definition of the situation, common themes of trust,

expression, resistance, and engagement appear. Moreover, these investigations may detect conditions beyond their own parameters, which emerged in an era when media merely contributed to, rather than shaped, the symbolic environment. Current trends indicate that a reflexive popular culture and information technology mediate, contextualize, and help to stage identity and social definitions that social scientists, as well as social actors, increasingly take for granted.

Many of the issues about identity and the definition of the situation are relevant for ethnographic research and indeed strongly suggest that all research should involve some ethnographic dimension in order to contextualize accounts and observations relevant to social action. At a time when identity increasingly is fractured from context, the substance of what we see and hear becomes more problematic. Relying mainly on words or actors' narratives, for example, can clarify a perspective on the lifeworld, but unless a context is clearly articulated, the definition of the situation may be lost. For example, one method of "salvaging the self" noted by Snow and Anderson was telling "personal stories," which these authors classified as "role distancing" accounts, "a self-conscious attempt to foster the impression of a lack of commitment or attachment to a particular role in order to deny the self implied"
(1993:216).

We also deal with identity when we consider how people learn about certain others in history or next door and how we should take that into account in putting together adequate performances of our own. Info-tainment and news and history increasingly share communication formats. Steven Spielberg's movie *Amistad,* about Africans who took control of a Cuban slave ship, offers history for fun—funstory? Taking this movie as an authoritative account of an event for educating students remains another matter. Such substitution of entertainment for education can happen because education has lost legitimacy, is routinely cast as a failure, and officially gropes for all manner of salvation—home teaching, charter schools, vouchers, and so on. Lifetime Learning Systems distributed "Amistad Learning Kits" to high schools and universities. The boundary between entertainment and education could not merely be crossed but bridged. Permanently. Lifetime offers "to help you *integrate* the lessons of this landmark film into your class plans" (my emphasis).

> The kit provides *reproducible worksheets* focusing on some of the film's key *themes and characters,* as well as background information and class discussion questions. It is *designed for courses* in American history, African American history, sociology and law. (My emphasis)

How should we approach this bridging from the standpoint of symbolic interaction and social commentary in a mediated environment? One historian, Eric Foner, an authority on slavery issues, wrote in "realist fashion,"

> The film is by no means a work of history, and it is certainly not appropriate for use in the classroom. . . . *Amistad* is an interesting historical film, but not in the way its producers intended. Like other films, it tells us more about the time in which it was produced than the event it tries to portray [refers to critical remarks about abolitionists]. In this way, the film reflects today's cynicism about broad so-

> cial movements. In fact, the abolitionists were largely responsible for winning freedom for those aboard the *Amistad. (Arizona Republic,* December 29, 1997, B7)

This take on identity merges with the definition of the situation: what do we have here—a film or an educational experience? Do film and education have different spaces and formats, and if not, when did these change, who changed them, and what did this entail? Despite Foner's concerns, *Amistad* has been endorsed as educational material. At least one teacher in the Phoenix Union High School District took students to the movie and ordered materials about it from the National Education Association. One student remarked, "What you wouldn't get in school, you get in the movie. And movies are more realistic because you're not just reading about it, you're seeing it." The same student also noted that another teacher "often shows students a documentary before they watch the Hollywood version to measure accuracy." A teacher added, "In the last 10 years, you could probably tell American history in Hollywood movies if you really wanted to" *(Arizona Republic,* February 17, 1998, Bl).

CONCLUSION

Popular culture provides an increasingly common and important generalized other. Role models, styles, and entertainment formats pervade everyday life. The rapidly changing character of information technology and mass-mediated experience challenges researchers to maintain conceptual balance while reflexively turning difficult social phenomena into methodological innovations. The curious relationship between identity and the definition of the situation marks one opportunity. Historically identity has been coupled with the definition of the situation. However, widespread awareness of the concept, its utility for rhetoric of liberation, along with mass media formats emphasizing entertainment and evocative rather than referential assertions, has separated identity from its conceptual progenitor, the definition of the situation.

Identity is wide open for claims makers, regardless of their familiarity with the most basic social science. As suggested by Cerulo's (1997) work, identity as process, connected to fundamental theories of self, intersubjective understanding, and communication, is passé. The word *identity* appears in more academic journals, even though the contents of articles reveal an astonishing naïveté, if not arrogance. Symbolic interactionists certainly do not own the concept, but increasingly anyone with an audience primed for its connotative benefits can use it. With few exceptions, "identity politics," "identity rights," and "affirming identity" have been folded into a broader discourse of liberation.

Identity as process essentially has been transformed into identity as form. Simmel (1968) taught that the transformation of cultural content and form previews an ongoing tragedy against a backdrop of hazy meaning. Drawing on Lyman's provocative explication of boundary definition and maintenance, public/private shifts, and the transformation of mass society, I suggest that trust remains most caught up with

identity and the definition of the situation. Lyman, in "The Drama in the Routine" (1977), calls attention to the relationship among praxes—deviance—new praxes. So-its, rituals, order, and trust are features of coordinated taken-for-granted lines of action. As Blumer (1962) suggested, mass society is caught up in a world of "constant motion" that can unsettle participants. This constant motion also plays conceptual havoc with social analysis and the confidence and camaraderie of social analysts:

> a sense of fearful disunity undermines the general conditions of trust and
> order, encouraging intrigues, deceptions and interaction that are strategic rather
> than spontaneous. Hence every routine drama is threatened and theatrically
> bids fair to become a routine in its own right. (Lyman 1997:294)

Identity as a feature of public and private spaces has profound implications for social order. Numerous interactionists, including Oldenburg (1991), delineate how the process of identity construction and demonstration has moved away from public places to more private domains. For Oldenburg, we are *how* and *where* we interact and *present ourselves* to audiences who affirm presentations and share definitions of the kind of place this is, the kind of people who come here, and the kind of lives we lead. Public "third places," where people gathered to talk and "be sociable," have been replaced by commercialized pay-or-get-out shops. As a result, the identity process was taken over by "you are what you spend, buy." Collective identities grounded in media processes still reflect the entertainment format.

Both intended and unintended emphases on either identity or the definition of the situation reflect differences in social prescriptions and social analysis. These differences are reflected in discussions about varied approaches to ethnography, and in many instances appear to lie at the root of claims about authenticity, including pronouncements about "realist" ethnography (see Denzin and Lincoln 1995; Snow and Morrill 1995). More interpretive and postmodern approaches tend to stress "identity" dimensions of their subject, while other ethnographers tend to stress the contextual dimensions more associated with the definition of the situation. Both float in popular culture. I want to stress, however, that one is often implied in the other, and cogent analysis can provide both. Either researcher or reader may reconnect these concepts and so benefit, but identity and definitions of the situation will still be there. And, like the creative Gaming Commission that redefined cruising when the gangplanks were lifted, we social scientists can improve our conceptual capacity to hold water by specifying the role of identity and the definition of the situation in our divergent approaches.

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