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## THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY IN THE BUSINESS WORLD : TOWARDS INVESTIGATION

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### Abstract:

In the last few years, the word identity seems to have become a difficult and ambiguous concept. Its difficulty lies in its changeability and transience. Certainly, Identity, be it social, cultural, religious or whatsoever, can be quickly shaped and changed by socio-political, economic, ideological and most importantly cultural forces. Nowadays, it is generally acknowledged that the construction of identity is dramatically increasing in almost every part of the world. Therefore, identity should be dealt with from different perspectives, both locally and globally. The present paper tends to question the concept of identity in the world of business in general, and inside call centers, which are located in Morocco in particular. Definitely, call centers are an increasingly important part of today's business world; they create new work opportunities for millions of agents across the globe and they serve as a primary customer-facing channel for firms in different countries. Their main aim is to conduct business and provide their customers with a sense of satisfaction before and after sales. However, these centers tend to impose some identity imperatives on their agents, which makes most of them, if not all, suffer from this type of work.

### Keywords:

Identity Definition, Social and Personal Identities, Call Center Definition and Identity Crisis

### Introduction

In recent years, the concept of identity seems to have become an ambiguous and slippery term that has been often used, or perhaps overused, in many different contexts and for many different purposes. Many researchers and theorists, especially those who are interested in the field of

social sciences and humanities, have been raising important questions about the concept of identity. Their main aim is to add some diverse assumptions and theories to what identity is, and to its relevance for human beings in general. However, despite this vastly increased interest in identity, the concept itself still remains debatable because it can easily be shaped and influenced by various changes related to sociopolitical, economic, ideological and cultural forces.

### Identity Definition

Definitely, the meaning of identity, as we tend to use it, seems not to be well understood as it should be. In fact, even though everyone feels that he or she is aware of how to use the word properly in his or her everyday interactions, it is still very difficult to give a clear and adequate definition for the word. This difficulty is due to the fact that identity has multiple meanings, and it is dealt with from different perspectives such as sociology, sociolinguistic, psychology, anthropology and ethnology. In line with this fact, Stella Ting Toomey asserts that:

Individuals acquire their identities via interaction with others and several perspectives from the disciplines of psychology; sociology and linguistics have been influential in exploring the links between social interaction and the formation and maintenance of self-identity.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the concept of identity is also very complex because it is closely connected to many other social aspects such as culture, race, gender and social nationalism. Since identities are very important in societies, all individuals all over the world tend to value them because they are considered as important vehicles for measuring the sense of self-worth. The more positive the value of an identity, the more an individual can benefit from it and vice versa. Besides, identity is of paramount importance because it helps individuals to belong to a specific social category. In other words, identity helps individuals to belong to a set of people characterized by their distinguished rules, specific features, values and characteristics. In line with this fact, the social psychologist Henry Tajfel considers identity as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (Or groups), together with the values and emotional significance attached to that membership.”<sup>2</sup>

Before exploring the concept of identity and showing the extent to which, it is very important for individuals and for their core sense of self, one can start by giving brief definitions and clarifications for the term. Generally, it seems that the majority of people knows how to employ the word properly and understand it when used by others. However, in fact, the concept is still ambiguous for others. In popular discourses, for instance, we find that identity is often treated as something valuable while in academy, it is believed that identity is still complex and difficult to achieve.

It should be noted that a huge number of psychologists have contributed to the analysis of this concept because of its importance. One of the best examples to start with are Hogg and Dominic who have tried to study identity in connection to how individuals define themselves and how

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<sup>1</sup> Ting-Toomey Stella, *Communicating across Cultures*. New York: Guildford Press, 1999. p.6

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Moha Ennaji, *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Education in Morocco*. New York: Springer, 2005. p.22

they belong to other groups of people. The two psychologists point out that identity refers to “people’s concepts of which they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others.”<sup>3</sup>

Another sociologist called Richard Jenkins confirms that identity should be dealt with from another perspective. For him, identity takes into account the social relations that try to distinguish between individuals and collectivities of one group and another. This is why he refers to identity as “the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities.”<sup>4</sup>

A third example is Charles Taylor whose contributions to the field of identity are also of paramount importance. In fact, Taylor tends to study identity in a specific way. He believes that this concept should be taken as a model that allows individuals to take decisions of what can be good, acceptable and valuable for them and what cannot be. Therefore, we find him arguing that “identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the framework or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose.”<sup>5</sup>

The last definition I wish to provide is what the psychologist Josselson states. For him, identity is part of the individual’s ego and each ego has its own specificities that make it different from the others. Josselson puts it as follows:

Identity is neither a structure nor a context but a property of the ego that organizes experience. It is an amalgam of constitutional givens, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, psychological defenses against inner conflict, significant identifications with important other interests and social roles. In a sense, we might think of identity formation as the assembling of jigsaw puzzle in which each person has somewhat different pieces to fit together.<sup>6</sup>

### **Social and Personal Identities**

Obviously, the variations, complexity and differences among these definitions are clearly shown because they all seem to refer to a common underlying concept. This is to be expected because it would be quite difficult and strange to offer a good definition for identity far from what we already understand by it. Generally, it is acknowledged that the concept of identity has been pondered since the days of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless nowadays, very important questions like who I am? As well as who do I want to be? And who do I want others to think I am? <sup>8</sup> seem to heavily impose themselves in all societies and it can be safely mentioned that most scholars still find it very difficult to appropriately respond to such

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<sup>3</sup> Hogg Michael and Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes*. London: Routledge, 1998. p.2

<sup>4</sup> Jenkins Richard, *Social Identity*. London: Routledge, 1996. p.4

<sup>5</sup> Taylor Charles, *The Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989. p.27

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Ennaji, *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Education in Morocco*.p.22

<sup>7</sup> See Edward, John. *Language and Identity: An Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009

<sup>8</sup> See Alvesson, M. “Talking in Organizations: Managing Identity and Impressions in an Advertising Agency.” *Journal of Organization Studies*, Vol. 15, 1994, pp.535-563.

questions because the concept of identity is very diverse and problematic. In an attempt to show the extent to which identities can impact people's everyday interactions, Ting-Toomey proposes that "two sources of identity typically influence an individual's everyday interaction: Group based-identity and person based-identity."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the author believes that it is possible to differentiate between two different types of identities, which might be termed social identities and personal identities. Both of them are closely connected and developed through the webs of culture as Ting-Toomey also points out when she mentions that "no individual person develops a sense of identity in a vacuum... Both social identity and personal identity are acquired and developed within the larger webs of culture."<sup>10</sup>

As for social identities, they refer simply to a social category, or a set of people marked and distinguished by their own rules, deciding membership and characteristics. Once joining these groups, either voluntary or involuntary, a big change in the way people tend to judge themselves occur and, as a consequence, a relative impact will surely shape their identity and vary according to each situation. In support of this fact, Rupert Brown confirms that

Our social identity-our sense of who we arise intimately bound up with our group membership. Thus, one of the first consequences of becoming a member of a group is a change in the way we see ourselves. Joining a group often requires us to redefine who we are which, in turn, may have implications for our self-esteem.<sup>11</sup>

However, in the second sense, personal identity is looked at from a different view. Numerous studies show that this type of identity can be regarded as a set of distinguishing characteristics that a person holds in order to specify himself or herself and be distinguished from the other groups of people. Moreover, the personal behavior, experiences as well as performances are also of paramount importance because they help in reflecting people's sense of identity. In trying to clarify this idea, Hill and Watson, et al. argue that

In contrast personal identities stem from the aspects of our self-concept that we use to differentiate ourselves from others and provide a sense of uniqueness. Personal experiences and personal traits may, for example, contribute to the notion of a personal identity. Our interaction with others also helps shape our sense of identity.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, a big number of theorists have stressed the importance of not only social interactions in the development of the self, but also focused on the type of work and workplaces of individuals. So, given the fact that individuals are increasingly spending most of their time at work, it is no wonder, then, to claim that work and workplace interactions may exercise a big influence on the ways one comes to understand and define the self<sup>13</sup>. In line with this fact,

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<sup>9</sup> Ting-Toomey Stella, *Communicating across Cultures*. p.6

<sup>10</sup> Ting-Toomey Stella, *Communicating across Cultures*. p.6

<sup>11</sup> Brown Rupert, *Group Processes*. Oxford: Massachusetts Blackwell, 2000. p.28

<sup>12</sup> Ann Hill and James Watson, et al. *Key Themes in Interpersonal Communication: Cultures, Identities and Performances*. England: Open University Press, 2007. p.49

<sup>13</sup> See Ciulla, Y. B, *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*. New York: Grown, 2000

Amy Gini, for example, makes reference to this idea when he argues that “where we work, how we work, what we do at work, and the general climate and culture of the workplace indelibly mark us for life.”<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, it is generally believed that one’s sense of self is not always stable<sup>15</sup>; it keeps changing as one move from one relationship to another. Identity can easily shape or be shaped by differences in environments and workplaces. In other words, all individuals may, for a variety of reasons, find themselves put in situations where they realize that their self-identities are really far away from their performances and discourses. This is what A. Giddens tries to point out when he claims that “all human beings, in all cultures, preserve a division between their self-identities and the performances they put on in specific social context.”<sup>16</sup>

In fact, identity not only defines who one is, but also provides a set of rules and assumptions about people’s experiences and their social interactions.<sup>17</sup>Therefore, one may safely claim that each identity embodies particular ways of talking and interacting according to each situation. For instance, it is quite possible to talk about a man who works in a company and who seems to hold a particular identity at work in terms of his language and behavior. However, this identity is completely different from the one he enacts at home with his wife and children. This idea is clearly demonstrated by A.J. Godley who states that “we can see ourselves and can be seen in a variety of ways depending on where we are, what we are doing, and with whom we are speaking”.<sup>18</sup>

### Call Center Definition

In the present paper, I am trying to question the idea of identity in the world of business in general, and in call centers located in Morocco in particular. However, before doing so, I would like first to give an idea about what we exactly mean by a call center. The latter seems to be an important way of doing business across the world. It has emerged as a new form that has really changed the way businesses are conducted. In short, a call center has become the point of entry for all customer communications because it is the place where all customers can make any type of inquiry and expect a quick and appropriate response. The components, technology and people with the required skills, training and motivation all exist to serve this relationship. Once these components are available, a company can start getting in touch with customers for doing business or solving their problems. Brad Cleveland, who is an expert in customer strategy and management, argues that the call center or contact center can be defined as

A coordinated system of people, processes, technologies,  
and strategies that provide access to information, resources  
and expertise, through appropriate channels of

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<sup>14</sup> Gini Amy Job, *Work and the Creation of the Modern Individual*. New York: Routledge, 2001. p.2

<sup>15</sup> See Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self Identity: Self Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991

<sup>16</sup> Giddens. A, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the late Modern Age*. p.58

<sup>17</sup> See Edwards, John. *Minority Languages and Group Identity: Cases and Categories*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2010

<sup>18</sup>A. J. Godley, ‘Literacy Learning as Gendered Identity’. *Communication Education*. Vol. 52, 2003. p.275

communication, enabling interactions that create value for the customer and the organization.<sup>19</sup>

The creation of the first calls center dates back to 1973; it was created, as William Durr states, “as a joint venture between what is now Rockwell Electronic and Continental Airlines”<sup>20</sup>. Airlines companies were the first ones to deal with call center because they were interested in selling airplane tickets. Later on, many other firms began to realize the big role of call centers in helping customers do business transactions with them. Nowadays, call centers and the services they provide have been created in different parts of the globe, because they play a central role in meeting the needs of their customers. In trying to confirm this fact, Natalie Calvert confesses that:

Indeed, customer service is now a global proposition that can be delivered anywhere and many organizations require advice around realizing the investment in their contact center in terms of enhanced customer service.<sup>21</sup>

However, when we try to shed some light on call centers located in Morocco, we realize that there are some important points at which one has to stop. Basically, some researchers such as Ciulla. J.B, for instance, believe that work “provides a means of discovering and creating oneself.”<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, this idea seems to be debatable with the case of the French call centers located in Morocco. The latter tend to make some specific identity imperatives and demands on their employees who are required to reduce their own accents and adopt the customer’s ones, pretend to be located in the customer’s country, change their native names and replace them by western ones that resemble those of their customers. In short, French call centers located in Morocco tend to impose a French environment to the extent that most Moroccan agents often believe that they live abroad when at work. Consequently, this type of work seems to negatively affect both Moroccans who do not have a strong national identity and even those who have it. In turn, French customers also seem not to be happy with this situation. This is very clear because most of them, if not all, do not deal adequately with the Moroccan agents. Furthermore, they always show their dismay and disappointment towards the bad quality and low type of Moroccan interactions.

Numerous questionnaires and interviews, which focused mainly on a number of Moroccan agents who work inside call centers located in some Moroccan cities like Oujda, Rabat and Casablanca, for instance, have made reference to the nasty responses and insults received by Moroccan agents, especially when French customers discover that they are not really served by real French operators. As a result, most Moroccan agents, if not all, find themselves torn between two concepts of identities or selves: a Moroccan self, which is hidden due to some external factors and under certain circumstances of marketing, and another French self which is neither truly felt, nor it is able to do the job appropriately. In this regard, Cooley states that

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<sup>19</sup> Cleveland Brad, *Call Center Management: Succeeding in the New Era of Customer Relationships*. New York: ICMI, 2012.p.16

<sup>20</sup> Durr William, *Navigating the Customer Contact Center in the 21st Century: A Technology and Management Guide*. New York: Advantar Communication Inc, 2001. p.11

<sup>21</sup> Calvert Natalie, *Gower Handbook of Call and Contact Centre Management*. England: Gower Publishing Limited, 2004. p. xx

<sup>22</sup> Ciulla. Y.B, *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*. New York: Grown, p.51

An important influence on the development of the self is the responses that others make to us and to our behavior. These responses serve as a looking-glass from which we learn to see ourselves as we imagine others see us. This feedback aids us in understanding who we are.<sup>23</sup>

### Identity Crisis

Interestingly, since identity is a very broad concept, it is possible to claim that identity can be divided into many different types. However, because my focus is to shed light on the concept of identity in call centers, I believe that the following types of identity are the most important ones to be put under scrutiny. The types are National identity, religious identity, Organizational identity and Occupational identity.

The first type to start with is that of national identity. The latter is believed to be one of the most important types of social identities. Das Diya defines it as “the extent by which individuals define themselves by their citizenship or the subjective importance of one’s national identity in the hierarchy of social identities.”<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, several studies have focused on the importance of one’s national identity and the extent to which it differs from one person to another because it seems to shape their attitudes and behaviors in different ways. In the same time, other studies have tried to link national identity to conditions of contemporary globalization. In the world of business, for example, the problem of national identity seems to have become more serious, especially with some foreign organizations such as call centers, which aim at outsourcing some of their functions overseas. A close look at the French call centers located in Morocco offers insight into how these centers try to impose on Moroccan operators the adoption of different identities and the neglect of their national ones. This is why it is argued that this type of work would certainly have different bad implications on Moroccan individuals because they will perceive a sort of threat to their identity. In other words, people with high degrees of national identity would find call center work as uncomfortable and, therefore, would suffer from high degrees of stress and depression, especially when there are no alternatives.

The second type is religious identity. It is interesting to mention that this type has become an important component in the types of social identities because it has proved to be very significant for global businesses across the world in general, and in the Islamic countries in particular. Various studies have focused on the role of religion in organizational life and how it is able to shape people’s attitudes and behaviors. In the context of call centers located in Morocco, religion also seems to play a crucial role; it is regarded as a social category around which people can define their identities. As a matter of fact, many Moroccan agents who work in these centers and who have a high degree of religious identity react differently to the identity modifications that are imposed on them. For instance, the majority of the agents express their anger towards assuming different sets of identities that involve masking their real religious

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<sup>23</sup> Qtd in Hill and Watson, et al. *Key Themes in Interpersonal Communication: Cultures, Identities and Performances*, p.50

<sup>24</sup> **Das Diya**, ‘Effects of Identity Variables and Job Performance on Employee Intentions to leave: An Empirical Study in Indian Call Centers.’ *Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings*. Vol. 29, 2012, p.3

identities during the process of interaction with French customers. This idea becomes obvious when Moroccan operators whose names are Mohammed, Ibrahim or Ahmed are forced to change their names for western ones like Jacques or François for the sake of satisfying French customers. Clearly, names of Mohamed or Ahmed are names of the prophet Mohamed, peace be upon him, and the fact of changing them for western names which are far from the Islamic religion, as well as faking other new identities will, no doubt, make Moroccan agents live a very difficult experience since it is something unethical and unaccepted. As a result of this religious identity crisis, it is believed that working inside these centers will be associated with lower performance, high stress and great turnover intentions.

As for the third type which is occupational identity, it has also proved to be an important part of identification at work. Diya defines it as “the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in their professional roles.”<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, it is generally acknowledged that one of the most important reasons behind the implementation of these centers in Morocco is the creation of new work opportunities for young Moroccans. This fact leads us to think that these centers do not have only negative sides, but also many positive ones and, as a result, one would like to question the extent to which young Moroccan employees feel happy to cope with and identify themselves within the confines of these centers. Certainly, working from eight to twelve hours a day, putting headphones on their ears while masking their real identities to satisfy French customers will, no doubt, create a big problem for the young operators who believe that the work of call centers should not be seen as a long-term career that must be preserved. It should be mentioned that the level of occupational identity would differ from one person to another depending on people’s goals and objectives. This implies that employees with low degrees of occupational identity would definitely have a strong desire to quit their work once an alternative is available to escape this type of work.

The last type to mention is called organizational identity. Diya refers to it as “the process by which the membership in an organization becomes a defining aspect of an individual’s aspect concept.”<sup>26</sup> This shows that organizational identity is closely related to one’s job; it is even argued that this type can have very positive implications and correlations with job satisfaction. However, studies also show that this work may be associated with negative implications. For many researchers, it is quite difficult and rare for a person to go on working in an organization such as the call center, enacting a different behavior, personality, culture and language for almost six days a week and eight hours a day without being negatively impacted on his or her definition of the self. In other words, it is claimed that organizational identity in the case of call centers is closely connected to negative implications since the majority of Moroccan agents always have intentions to leave these centers because they are not satisfied with the working conditions imposed on them.

## Conclusion

The general claim that I will inquire for this paper, is whether, as stated by many academicians, scholars and policymaking experts, identity imperatives that are imposed on Moroccan agents who work in call centers located in Morocco, such as assuming a different western name or alias that resembles the names of their French customers, undergoing an intensive voice aiming

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<sup>25</sup> Diya. *Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings*.p.3

<sup>26</sup> Diya. *Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings*. p.3



at reducing their native accents while developing the French one as well as the adoption of some life-style of their overseas customers, can lead, in the future, to an identity crisis under conditions of contemporary globalization.

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