# The life story model of identity: A bridge between two spaces.

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*Ko Hikurangi toku maunga*
*Ko Waiapu toku awa*
*Ko Horouta taku waka*
*Ko Ngati Porou toku iwi*
*Ko Hinemaurea te marae*
*Ko Te Whanau o Tu Whakairiora te hapu*
*Ko Carla Houkamau toku ingoa*
*Nga mihi ki a koutou katoa*

**Introduction**

Two questions which continue to absorb Western social psychological researchers are: What is the 'self'? And 'What is identity in relation to self?' At the NMPPS this year this Dr. Love's keynote threw these matters into relief prompting us as indigenous psychologists to reflect deeply on the nature of 'selves'. Many questions arise from her address. Do we have ensembled selves? Are we self contained? Are we a bit of both depending on the situation? How do we work within psychology while honouring Māori perspectives?

Questions like these shaped my decision to employ a life story model of personal identity within my own PhD research 'on' Māori identity between 2003 and 2006. My choice to do so was based on several factors - which are articulated in this paper.

As a starting point I acknowledge that Māori identity is under theorised within psychology. More specifically, published scholarly works concerned with Māori identity tend to be descriptive rather than explanatory - often motivated by the desire of the writer to articulate a uniquely Māori view of the world. As such, literature tends to cohere around how Māori identity reflects the cultural traditions, values and behaviours of Māori as a people (e.g. Barlow, 1991; Karetu, 1979, 1990, 1993; Pere, 1979, 1988;

Puketapu, 1979). This leaves psychological theoretical development (that is, explanations of how identity operates 'in the mind' in a psychological sense, as well as a social and behavioural sense) relatively less attended to.

This is not to say that Māori are not prolific writers on identity, rather that Māori students within this discipline are often required to find (or construct) an identity model to render their research acceptable within the dominant paradigm that we operate. This is problematic as Māori ideas and social psychological treatments of identity often conflict and many Māori have critiqued the applicability of conventional psychological wisdom for Māori (e.g. Cram, Smith & Johnstone, 2003; Edwards, McManus & McCreanor, 2005, Liu & Tamara, 1998; Liu, Wilson, McClure & Higgins, 1999; McCreanor, Tipene-Leach & Abel, 2004). Nonetheless, we can continue to borrow ideas from Western psychology. Indeed, as qualitative researchers within this discipline increasingly shift towards methodologies which embrace participant centred and narrative based approaches we edge closer to constructing that bridge between two spaces.

To explain why I see the life story model of identity (LSIM) as a way of creating a space for Māori views of identity within psychology I begin with a definition of identity within psychology along with a brief outline of how Western identity theories emphasise a particular view of the self. I then discuss how the LSIM (and associated life story interview process) treats the person as a maker of meaning from within the ecology from which they emerge. In this way the LSIM treats identity as a unified, purposeful aspect of self that people construct in order to make comprehensible 'who' they are and what that means as a member of society. This I see as consistent with

(although not the same as) indigenous understandings of the self which emphasise interdependence between individuals and social networks. At the same time, the LSIM is becoming an acceptable conventional identity model within Western social psychological research and, when based within a grounded theory methodological foundation this approach enables rigorous data collection and analysis. In this way I see a bridge between Māori views of identity and Western identity theory. (A discussion of the data analysis processes (or data presentation) is not provided here - I focus specifically upon the links between the LSIM and Māori perspectives of identity.)

## Identity theory within a Western Psychological Paradigm

From a Western psychological perspective everything a person knows about themselves is stored within their 'self concept'. This comprises the totality of self-descriptions and self-evaluations individuals have available to them as a person and is traditionally conceived of as an internal frame of reference (a cognitive structure with a physiological basis) which guides the individual's behaviour towards the world outside (Gecas, 1982; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983; Rosenberg, 1965, 1979, 1981; Shibutani, 1961).

Identity is defined as part of the self concept that relates to social comparison (Josselson, 1996; Williams, 1989). People understand who they are by relating themselves to others in various ways. They then take the information available to them and construct their identities to make sense with and relate themselves to social categories including gender, racial, ethnic, sexual, and class systems. In this way, although all people experience having an identity of their 'own' identity is socially determined. In fact, it would be difficult to find anything about 'personal' identity which is not socially derived (Breakwell, 1983).

## Theories of identity

Identity in Western literature has been traditionally conceptualised as something the individual must resolve, 'work through' and consolidate in order to be a fully functioning person. For example, early identity theorist, Erikson (1968) defined identity as a more or less integrated set of self-understandings learned during childhood, consolidated during adolescence and ideally resolved by the time individuals had reached their adult years. The content of identity as an object of examination, he suggested, was the person's answer to the question 'Who am I' (self-definitions) and 'What does it mean to be 'me' as a member of society' (self-descriptions and evaluations). The purpose of identity in this view was to 'consolidate' the individual as a mature adult. The more 'advanced the individual's identity development' the greater their self-awareness and sense of confidence, purpose and meaning. On the other hand, the less developed the individual's identity, the more confused they were about their own distinctiveness and therefore, they would have to rely upon others for direction and a sense of purpose.

His views have been hugely influential in psychology spawning a vast array of literature on identity development and psychological well being. The most often cited elaboration of Erikson's views is Marcia's (1966, 1967, 1976, 1980, 1993) identity status model. Marcia treated identity as a socially constructed psychological structure ('in the mind') which comprised the self-definitions, self-descriptions and self-evaluations individuals developed in order to function fully as adults. Identity was conceived of in terms of four psychological statuses based on the amount of exploration and commitment to an identity the individual had experienced.

Marcia also developed a quantitative tool to assess identity statuses thus providing researchers with a 'tangible' construct to measure - subsequently spurring hundreds of empirical studies. The popularity of Marcia's model is testimony to the values which have dominated traditional identity research. Much empirical identity research has been based upon the notion that individuals are 'better' if they are individuated (self sufficient) adults who are at the centre of their own control. Identity has therefore been seen as a problem adolescents must resolve (or a challenge that must be met) and – psychologists can therefore wrestle identity into a stage related statuses which can be verified in terms of quantifiable units.

The assumption that individuals hold a measurable construct called identity in their minds also underpinned the ideas of McCall and Simmons (1968)

who proposed role theory. In their view identities (self definitions and self meanings) are constructed via passive internalisation of social expectations attached to social role. These become stored in the mind of the individual as 'role identities' or sets of concepts that determined how one 'should' think, feel, as well as behave as an occupant of certain social roles. In this view the extent to which individuals fulfill this social role appropriately determines their level of adaptability to the world 'outside'.

Social identity theory also views identity as an internal cognitive structure but emphasises that identity emerges at the intersection of self and society. Tajfel (1981) made a specific distinction between what he called personal identity and social identity. Focussing on the role of social group membership on identity he defined social 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 value and emotional significance attached to that group membership" (Tajfel, 1981, p.255). Personal identity was conceived of as a general view of the self (including personal beliefs about the self, skills, and abilities) influenced by social identities, however, quite unique to each individual. By differentiating social and personal identities, social identity theory sees people's identities as shaped by their group memberships but not completely determined by them. The underlying assumption however is that identity is personally and individually experienced (thus amenable to measure and study in terms of exploring the extent to which personal beliefs are consistent with social expectations).

A variation on this concept was offered by Stryker (1968, 1980, 1987) who combined the idea of social role with the impact of social contexts. Like McCall and Simmons, Stryker also viewed identity as a reflection of a person's social roles. However, he sought to clarify how people switch from identity to identity depending on social demands. To explicate identity changeability he theorised that people's role-related behaviour varies in relation to commitment and salience. He argued that because people desire social acceptance, they emphasise certain social group memberships or role identities in certain situations. As such, people's expressed identities do not reflect an unvarying or unified set of features a person 'has' rather, the identity that people express emerges from a mixture of role identities which are held in the person's mind and selectively valued, expressed and experienced across social situations depending upon the degree of commitment and salience those identities hold. Identity is viewed as multi-dimensional with many different role identities (including nationality, ethnicity, gender, family, social class, occupation and sexuality) varying in salience depending environmental demands and associated requirement upon the individual to express them (Woodward, 2000).

This model of identity therefore moves away from the emphasis upon stable self constructs within the mind to posit a more fluid model of self which varies depending on context. Goffman echoed this perspective and defined identity as something adopted to accommodate the presence of others. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) Goffman argued people have many different aspects to their identity and can choose to present themselves differently across different social situations depending on the impression they wish to make. In his view, identity was not at all fixed or internal, rather, individuals create short-term situated identities, or temporary renditions of themselves, and change them according to social context (also see Goffman, 1967). In this view, people's identities are 'fragmented' and constantly changing to gain the acceptance of those around them.

What do all these different approaches to identity suggest about the self and what it is to have an identity? This plethora of approaches suggests identity is a mixture of self experiences – all of which are represented within various identity theories. Neisser (1988), for example, discriminated five primary aspects of the self which have been expressed within various identity models.

First, in order to experience identity we need to have a sense of the self as an object or actor in the social world – that is who we are as a person occupying a physical body within a material world at any given moment over time. Neisser has referred to this as the ecological self - the awareness of this aspect of the self is automatic and present from infancy.

Second, 'having' an identity suggests the presence of a 'private self'. This aspect of self-experience exists in the mind of the person who 'has' it. This is a psychological experience which is never fully available for others to see – yet it is experienced as real by the individual. For example only I can really understand what it is like to identify as a member of my own family, although there are many of us who belong to my whanau, my own experience of belonging will be different from the others and it is privately my own.

Third, identity contains elements of a 'conceptual self' which comprise the diverse forms of self information, acquired via socialisation, that relate to the person's membership in various social groups. This is partly 'had' by the individual – yet it is not of their origin and is inherently social in nature. For example, my experience of being Māori means I share commonalities and a sense of similarity and belongingness with other people who share that identity.

The notion of the conceptual self turns our gaze to the notion of being socially derived – we are what we are in relation to others. This same fluid self other boundary is what is occurring when an identity 'emerges' from the 'situated self' within an immediate social interaction with another.

While most of us are aware of a situated aspect of our own identities, we are still aware of being the same person from situation to situation. The extended self, according to Neisser, refers to people's sense of continuity – or more specifically their understandings of themselves as human beings who have had a continuous experience of being the same person over time. This experience of having an integrated or 'real' identity is an aspect of self-experience known to all. In fact, it is difficult to imagine living without an identity we see as 'ours' that we carry with us throughout our lives (Glover, 1988; Smith, 1988).

Thus, in working with identity, one must (ideally) recognise various elements of the self (private, social, situated, extended, conceptual and ecological). Despite this, the fragmentation of self aspects evident in the current array of identity theories has lead to a reduction of the self into pieces –with different theories accounting for different aspects of self experience that occur at different levels and at different times. This is problematic from a Māori perspective – because the self is seen in a holistic sense. Moreover, the dominance of the view that independence and autonomy are the ideal identity states within Western psychological theory is problematic from a Māori world view which assumes maturity through interdependence and connectedness.

In order to amalgamate the various identity perspectives and create a space for Māori ideas regarding identity to be spoken I turned to the LSIM. This model is more holistic and conceives of the individual as constructed by social networks and inextricably understood as part of a community of meaning that exists within time and space.

**The life-story model**

The LSIM has been emergent within mainstream psychology for several years – a process enabled greatly by the work of McAdams (1985, 1994, 2001). McAdams argued that identity should be seen as taking the form of a personal life-story in which life phases may be considered 'chapters' in the individual's evolving psychological autobiography (Atkinson, 1999; Bruner, 1987; 1997; Polkinghorne, 1988). According to the model, in late adolescence and young adulthood people start to organise and make meaning of their lives by creating 'inner' personal histories that reconstruct their own past and anticipate their future. To do this they draw upon all the events that have happened to them in the past, tie them together in a meaningful sequence and use that 'story' to explain who they are, what that means, and where they are 'going'.

In recent years, several theorists have proposed that personal life-stories are the best available structure to make sense of how individuals come to experience and understand themselves as individuals in time (Atkinson, 1999; Ezzy, 1998; Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Sarbin, 1986, 1993).

McAdams (1994) suggested the life-story approach is consistent with situation-specific views of identity because the expressions of identity people make publicly may be viewed as a selection of the

appropriate aspects of a person's own story, tailored for the moment in which it is expressed and formulated to be appropriate to a particular audience. The idea of identity development is also accommodated in this model as it assumes that, because individuals continue to live their lives and accumulate self-knowledge, their life-story is continually a work in progress, changing over time reflecting changes in the person's self-understandings, social environment, social roles and relationships (McAdams, 2001).

The appeal of the treatment of identity as held within life-stories is that it incorporates the various aspects of self-experience labelled identity by theorists into one process of continuous identity formation and self development in a way that no other perspective has been able to achieve. Moreover, the LSIM enables us to conceive identity – not as a possessed thing or static structure – but as an ongoing process of self development and self construction – experienced by the individual yet socially derived and expressed through interaction with a community of others who share a similar story (Eakin, 2000; Ezzy, 1998; Glover, 1988; Leiblich & Josselson, 1994; Linde, 1993). Thus, although the personal life-story may be conceived of as an 'inner' identity the position enables the individual self to be appreciated in terms of important relationships and – thus gives primacy to interdependence, interrelatedness among individuals.

Reinforced by the inclusiveness of this approach and the ability for the model to embrace personal experiences of interdependence and self fluidity I adopted the LSIM for my work with Māori - taking the view that identity may be found in the 'contents' of life-stories – specifically in the self-definitions, self-descriptions and associated meanings that individuals attach to themselves when asked to talk about their identity as Māori.

The appeal of this approach was not only limited to theoretical inclusivity. Other features were deemed important. For example, there remains a cultural preference in Māori society for the use of story-telling to pass on knowledge thus rendering the model useful for Māori (Bishop, 1996; Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Secondly, the approach creates a space for an alternative view of the experience of having an identity to be voiced. Unlike other identity models in psychology which have tended to measure identity in relation to pre established roles, theory or statuses the life-story approach opts for the use of open ended story-telling to elicit identity perceptions (Bujold, 1990; Spradley, 1979; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Schutze; 1981, 1983, 1987 cited in Reimann & Schutze, 1991). Thus I was able to explore identity from the subject's perspectives (rather than 'measuring' it using a pre constructed assessment instrument) (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984; Bertaux & Thompson, 1997; Garfinkel, 1967; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rosenthal, 1993). This enabled participants the space to express their own stories in their own words without being prompted by me (Oplatka, 2001).

Moreover, by their nature, life-stories require individuals to explain themselves with reference to the social world, relationships and events that shaped them (McAdams, 2001). As such, life-stories carry explanations for the origins of identity for the person in their own social ecology in relation to people, places, experiences, groups, cultural values and any sources of information they perceived as relevant. Using this model therefore, my participants were able to speak of the sense of interdependence and interrelatedness within the communities within which they belonged. They were able to speak of experiences in the Māori world, spiritual beliefs, cultural values and important relationships with whanau, hapu and iwi – without being directed or channelled by me. These ideas were then able to be validated and expressed throughout the thesis in the subjects own words.

## Conclusion

In using the LSIM I attempted to bridge the gap between Māori views of identity and social psychological identity theory. Here I do not purport to fill the gap in the literature between Māori views and identity theory. Of course, there is a still a long way to go in terms of bridge building – however - being in a position to write about such matters compels you do so, even if your concepts are rudimentary and still under development. A more appropriate title for this paper may have been a 'make shift bridge' between spaces. I do hasten to add however, although the foundations of my bridge may be somewhat unstable

at least they enabled me to pass from one space to another (Robinson, 2008). It is hoped that these ideas add usefully to the growing pool of conceptual resources Māori psychologists are generating. As we generate our ideas collectively, and continue to interpret non Māori perspectives to suit our own needs and aspirations, we will continue to develop not just bridges between spaces – but also ensure our own space continues to expand in new directions.

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