

# A Foot in Each World: The Development of Identity Complexity in Impinging Environments

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the concept of identity complexity as it applies to people who experience their environment as hostile and impinging. The work of object relations and intersubjective theorists are considered, and a case illustration is utilized to conceptualize problems with identity complexity and their effect on intrapsychic and interpersonal functioning.*

## Introduction

Leanita McClain (1986) was an African-American journalist who committed suicide at the age of 32. The product of a south-side Chicago housing project, McClain defied the so-called odds by achieving all of the pearls of an upper-class existence. She had, by most accounts, achieved the American dream. She existed among the elite during the day, feeling very different as an African-American in a world of Whites. She attempted to remain true to her roots despite feeling different among her Black family members and friends who had not achieved her level of material success. However, the torment of living a dual existence ravaged by feelings of guilt, isolation, and disengagement, rendered her incapable of enjoying her success. Over time, she came to believe that both of her environments were hostile and alien. She was a person for whom life had no meaning and no appeal. I came to understand McClain's barren existence in terms of problems with identity complexity, which is defined as a highly developed capacity to create meaning with the sense of self being highly differentiated, articulated, and integrated (Saari, 1993).

During a class session in October 2002, the following questions were posed: "Can a person's identity be too complex?" and "Is there a point and are there conditions under which any of us would 'go nuts?'" I have come to believe that the point at which we no longer experience our environments as safe and we are unable to regulate our affect within this environment, we are in grave danger of losing our sense of self, our identity, and our ability to create meaning. What has intrigued me about the concept of identity complexity are the necessary components of articulation, differentiation, and integration of selves (Saari, 1993). Leanita McClain (1986) wrote, "I have a foot in each

world, but I cannot fool myself about either." McClain's chameleon-like false self reflected her environments without integrating them and without creating meaning around her experiences in a way that would make them tolerable for her. McClain's different selves were articulated and differentiated but not integrated. The ambivalence of her fractured multiple lives became intolerable for her, and she became depleted by the burden of trying to manage an inconsistent existence. This powerful example of problems with identity complexity fuels the need for further exploration of its development and maintenance.

Mead (1934) says that there is a need for participation in a community. For various reasons, people are often participants of multiple communities and have to negotiate and integrate the symbols of each. Considering the climate and time in which Mead made this assertion, it is not likely that he was referring to the so-called sub-cultures or other marginalized groups of people who are expected by both the mainstream community and the sub-culture community to understand and comply with the demands of each community. Mead, Saari, Basch, Winnicott and others provide a framework for exploring the integration of multiple selves and the role that integration plays in the development of a healthy self. This framework offers many possibilities and ways to think about people who, because of environmental impingement or exclusion from an environment, set about the task of developing and maintaining identity complexity.

This paper explores the nature of identity complexity for individuals who are part of two or more environments that are dissimilar in nature, alien to their sense of self, and difficult to bridge. I explore the concept of self and examine how others have defined and explained concepts related to self and environment. I utilize a case study to illustrate how I understand the concept of identity complexity in a practice setting.

## Review of Theory

The integration of selves, roles, and environment can be a daunting process even for people who feel engaged with and supported by their environment(s). However, people who feel excluded, alienated, and disengaged from their environment(s) undoubtedly face extreme barriers to developing and maintaining

identity complexity. The person-in-environment perspective is an identifying focus of the social work profession, yet this concept often remains “conceptually elusive and difficult to apply” (Applegate & Bonovitz, 1995, p. 8). Exploring the role of identity complexity and goodness of fit may offer a unique opportunity to examine the person in, outside of, and between his or her environment(s), focusing on the processes of integration and creation of meaning over time.

What conditions are necessary for people to effectively and consistently understand and manage their selves? How do these conditions vary when life roles are chosen as opposed to assigned? According to Mead (1934), we are different selves and have a different self for every environment in which we participate. One of the tasks, then, is to integrate the various selves by way of internalizing symbols and gestures of the environment to which we belong. As it becomes more and more evident that Hartmann’s (1939) “average expectable environment” is neither average nor expectable, but may be hostile and impenetrable, the question of adaptation and identity complexity becomes crucial.

According to Siporin (1983), identity is a core element of the self-system, as well as of group and of social institutional structures. This understanding of identity is consistent with Erikson’s assertion that an identity outside of membership and participation in a social group is not possible (Saari, 1986). However, neither is the maintenance of identity possible without a constant interrelationship with the rest of reality (Saari, 1986). In *Acts of Meaning*, Jerome Bruner (1990) asked,

[B]y what processes and in reference to what kinds of experience do human beings formulate their own concept of self, and what kinds of self do they formulate? Does “self” comprise (as William James has implied) an extended self incorporating one’s family, friends, possessions, and so on? Or, as Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius suggested, are we a colony of possible selves, including some that are feared and some hoped for, all crowding to take possession of a now self? (p. 100).

## The Paradox of Self

An exploration of identity complexity would not be complete without an examination of the concept(s) of self. The term “self,” so ambiguous in nature that it defies a single, simple definition, lies at the core of identity complexity and yet it has eluded many great thinkers of our time.

William James considered the self from three distinct aspects: (1) the material, bodily self which he called the empirical self, (2) the social self, and (3) the spiritual self, which he described as the core of the self, a “palpitating inward life, a central nucleus” (Modell, 1990, p. 33). James grasped the self as a mental structure and the self as consciousness that much to his dismay presented a paradox he could not solve. He noted that despite our dependence on social affirmation there is a portion of the self that enables us to become autonomous and free of such social dependency. There is an I that is witness to the Me as well as the Not Me (Modell, 1990). For the spiritual or core self, this poses a dilemma: what makes the self continuous over time?

Modell (1990) states that if there is indeed a hierarchy of human aspirations, self-actualization through the emergence of personal values and personal interests (private self) takes precedence over social affirmation. Noting this paradox, Mitchell (1993) writes:

Is there something problematic or difficult to grasp about regarding mind in both intrapsychic and interpersonal terms? Some writers (such as Arnold Modell) have suggested that this amounts to bringing together two essentially incompatible frames of reference and therefore constitutes a paradox. Since Winnicott (1989) has made the concept of paradox acceptable (even fashionable) maintaining both the intrapsychic and the interpersonal in a contradictory but complementary juxtaposition is thought to be possible (p.143).

Gerald Edelman, a neurobiologist, addressed this paradox, although in a somewhat narrow manner (Modell, 1990). Edelman views the self as nearly coterminous with consciousness: consciousness implies the capacity for self/nonself discrimination. This biological self has evident survival value and rests upon structures of the nervous system that are different from those that mediate the perception of the external world. The continuity of the experience of self is linked to the homeostatic function of the nervous system. The self is the repository of special value-laden memory systems. By identifying the function of memory as something that allows the self to persist over time, Edelman (Modell, 1990) alludes to the notion that the self has some structure and is more than illusory in nature.

Ideas about the nature of memory are central to understanding the nature of internalization processes and of the content that is internalized. Without memory, human beings would have no sense of organiza-

tion across time or of endurance, which, as Erikson emphasized in his concept of identity, is extremely important for psychological health (Modell, 1990). Loewald (1980) has attributed the experience of fragmentation of the self to an “inability to order a given event in a context of the present, past and future, with the result that the moment stands alone, not embedded in a time continuum. The temporal ordering of experience is a basic and critical function for human beings” (p. 144). In clinical theory, there has been considerable debate about whether therapy is or should be focused on an understanding of the past or the here and now. This argument, however, seems to be based on the misconception that time unfolds in a simple, linear fashion (Modell, 1990). Loewald (1980) asserts that “memory is not just content but is also an activity” (p. 150), and while the content is concerned with the past, memorial activity always occurs in the present. Taking Edelman’s ideas about memory as a requisite for the maintenance of self over time quite further and incorporating a relational focus, Saari (1996) writes,

The content of consciousness is constructed either following or concurrent with activity or experience; it does not pre-exist as biologically inherited meaning. Experience may be represented in the individual’s cognitive system (which includes perception, memory and the schematic representation of events as well as concepts and categories) without being either linguistically or consciously accessible. Such inaccessible experience will still have an effect on behavior even though it remains pre- or nonverbal (p. 154).

Harry Stack Sullivan, in contrast to Edelman, felt that the uniqueness of self is an illusion. According to Sullivan, we have an “almost inescapable illusion that there is a perduring, unique, simple existent self, called variously ‘me’ or ‘I,’ and in some strange fashion, the subject person’s private property” (Mitchell, 1993, p. 108). Inasmuch as the self is defined by others, individuals do not exist. In a relational vein not unlike the writings of Winnicott, Sullivan believed that the idea of uniqueness each of us maintains is the greatest psychological impediment to constructive living and that an appreciation of our commonality with others, not our distinctions, holds the key to a richer life (Mitchell, 1993).

Freud managed to sidestep the complications of defining self by objectifying it and describing only the structural attributes and their purposes. Freud did not consider the self as a center of consciousness perhaps

because such a consideration would prove impossible to study empirically. In an attempt to incorporate the notion of self into drive theory, Heinz Hartmann used the concept of self-representations to describe the self as no different from any other object of perception, in that self is an outside observer’s inference of the subject’s self experience (Modell, 1990).

Paul Federn, perhaps in an attempt to bridge the false dichotomy of self and environment, thought that in healthy individuals the bodily self and the psychological self are unified (Modell, 1990). The differentiation of self from non-self is a very fluid process that is negotiated through ego boundaries. It is not clear if in his writing Federn was speaking of person-in-environment as we understand it now. However, it appears that he was questioning the feasibility of person separate from environment. Winnicott (Modell, 1990) illuminated the whole notion of the inseparability of person from environment when he wrote, “[E]ach individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound.” He went on to say that “there is no ‘self’ except in relation to others” (p. 42).

Winnicott recognized the existence of both private (true) and social (false) selves. The true self is the source of authenticity, psychic aliveness, and the assurance of the continuity of being. The false self responds compliantly to others in order to protect the true self from non-acceptance and exploitation. Winnicott acknowledged that the true self is paradoxical in that it enables the individual to be alone but requires initially the continuity of the external environment. However, he did not view the paradox as alarming or problematic. He seemed to embrace the notion that to become autonomous, one needs the presence of another and that we possess both autonomous private selves and dependent social selves, which appear to have opposing aims (Modell, 1990). It is through the work of Winnicott that there begins to be some understanding of how identity is constructed, and how it is maintained over time.

While Winnicott (1989) espoused a self inextricably linked to others, he dispelled the notion of separateness, and highlighted the false dichotomy between self and others while acknowledging that there is something that occurs in the space between self and others which Saari (1996, p. 149) calls the interpsychic space, and Winnicott called the transitional space. This notion of a space that is neither I nor You, but We, provides us with a concept to begin exploring identity complexity, and how the understanding of self is rooted in relationships with others. The self psychol-

ogy of Heinz Kohut (1984) might have provided a nice segue into this exploration had he not posited the self-object as a tool used solely for the development and maintenance of the intrapsychic, thus disregarding its relational value. If we are to understand the selfobject as someone who feeds the self and to whom the self does not feed back, there exists no reciprocity and therefore no relationship. In his writings on affective attunement, Daniel Stern says that affect not attuned by others in the caretaking environment cannot be shared with others (Saari, 1996). This attunement connotes interaction and the inseparability of self from activity, thus giving us some understanding of how we come to contemplate objects in our environment and construct our identity.

This exploration of the concept of self, self development, and self maintenance guides the focus to identity development and identity complexity. Bruner defines identity as a “personal meaning system that is created over the course of the individual’s experience with the world and is organized primarily in narrative form” (quoted in Saari, 1996, p. 144). Saari (1996) explains identity as the content of the autobiographical stories told to self and others and states that “identity may also be seen as an individual’s personal theory about himself or herself, about the world, and about his or her relationship with the world and vice-versa. It is through this personal theory that the individual organizes past experiences and plans future actions” (p. 144). Identity does not fundamentally exist inside the isolated individual waiting to be uncovered through an archeological exploration of the layers of an unconscious, but is a meaning system created through dialogue with others (Saari, 1996).

Further elaborating on the idea of self and others, internal and external, Patrick Casement (1991) writes: “For each person, there are always two realities: external and internal. External reality is experienced in terms of the individual’s internal reality, which in turn is shaped by past experience and a continuing tendency to see the present in terms of that past” (p. 3). People have to create an understanding of their environment before they can create a sense of who they are in that environment. This understanding is a core element of identity and therefore necessary for the development of identity complexity. In addition, it is likely that personal identity does not form in an early developmental stage and then endure reasonably intact throughout life. If this were the case there would be no need to understand identity complexity since it would not exist. Identity is constantly modified, created, and recreated in negotiations with inter-

active partners throughout a person’s life (Saari, 1996).

To help consider the application of these ideas, the following case study will be discussed from the framework of Winnicottian object relations theory. The identifying information has been changed to protect the confidentiality of the client and her family.

### The Case of Monica

Monica, a 34-year-old black female born and raised in the West Indies, came to treatment because she was having difficulty dealing with her 14-year-old daughter, Mercedes. Monica, a divorced woman with a strong Catholic background, became enraged after finding a love letter in Mercedes’s book bag written by a female classmate. Mercedes admitted to Monica that she had long been attracted to girls but that this was her first experience with a same-sex romantic relationship. Monica, unable to deal with the possibility of Mercedes being gay, sent her to live with her paternal grandmother. Their relationship became strained and the distance between them increased when Mercedes decided to make her living situation with the grandmother permanent. Monica decided to seek treatment when she realized that she was unable to deal with this situation alone.

During our initial session, Monica revealed to me that her difficulties had begun long before she and Mercedes starting having problems. Born in Trinidad to an unmarried, poor, uneducated mother and an idealistic, uninvolved father who was married to another woman at the time that Monica was conceived, Monica felt unloved and unaccepted by family members and peers. At age ten, she was sexually assaulted by her mother’s boyfriend and kept this information a secret for more than a year. When she finally told her mother what happened, her mother accused her of lying and sent her to live with her grandmother in Chicago. Due to some problems with school transcripts and transfer of credits, Monica was placed in the fourth grade in a Chicago public school. Monica’s West Indian accent, fully developed body and tall stature made her stand out as an eleven-year-old in a classroom of nine-year-olds. She was ridiculed and shunned the entire year. Monica’s grandmother was sympathetic to Monica’s experience and the following year enrolled her in a private school in an upper-middle class, mostly white community. If Monica thought the year at the public school had been bad, she was not ready for the treatment she received from the students and teachers at the private school. For the first time in her life, she was called

“nigger,” and she soon came to understand that while she didn’t fit well in the public school, she didn’t fit at all in the private school. Despite the hardships, Monica maintained a high grade point average and graduated with honors. She was accepted to a prestigious private high school with a full scholarship where she graduated at the top of her class despite having no friends and feeling very much estranged from the high school community.

Shortly after graduating (at age 19) Monica met James, a 21-year-old, African-American man whom she described as “street smart, smooth, and right out of the hood.” James appealed to Monica because he seemed to fit into what she understood to be the Black community. Monica and James started dating immediately, and soon after she became pregnant with Mercedes. Though the pregnancy thwarted Monica’s plans to attend college, she was excited by the prospect of becoming a wife and mother. Monica and James married when Mercedes was a year old, and they both tried to settle into their role as parents. Monica and James spent a great deal of time sharing experiences about their respective pasts and trying to comfort and support each other. However, Monica found it difficult to relate to some of the things that James revealed to her. One such revelation was that James had been sexually assaulted as a child by his father. Monica wondered if that meant that James was gay. She tried to compare it with her own experience of being sexually assaulted, but decided that his experience was far beyond her comprehension because it involved two people of the same sex. These thoughts haunted Monica and she no longer felt that she and James were soul mates. They were separated shortly thereafter and divorced when Monica was 25 and James was 27.

James and Mercedes remained close following the divorce, and Monica was very critical of their relationship. She wondered if James was the reason that Mercedes was gay. After the divorce, Monica began working as a secretary in a prestigious law firm downtown. She stated that she found the climate at the law firm quite “alien” and felt as if she didn’t fit in because she was the only African-American in the office. However, she admitted that she probably wouldn’t have fit in even if there had been other African-Americans, as she had not had any good relationships with people of her race in the past. After working at the law firm for four years, she enrolled in college and majored in psychology, a major she chose in hopes of understanding herself better. We began our work together during her senior year.

During our initial session, Monica became preoccupied with my braided hairstyle and wondered aloud if she too should consider wearing braids. She then wondered if the hairstyle would be considered appropriate at her workplace. She questioned me about how I was accepted as a Black person working in a “White organization.” She was intrigued by my answers and wondered if she should consider becoming a social worker. This discussion seemed important to Monica, so I participated to the extent that I felt comfortable. I too was intrigued to be working with one of the very few African-American clients served by the agency. I was accustomed at this point to being perceived as an enigma, or a “pink poodle” of sorts, even by other African-Americans. Monica and I had similar experiences in this respect. However, while I felt sufficiently rooted in my African-American heritage, Monica felt excluded from hers. As we sat face to face, we were alike in our “differentness” and different in our likeness.

I felt the full force of Monica’s disconnectedness from the various parts of herself and the resulting difficulties from this disconnection. She assumed that one must take on the characteristics of the host environment, not bringing any parts of her own self with her. Further, she did not conceptualize a self to bring. Monica often operated like a chameleon, taking on the shape and color of her environment while maintaining none of her own characteristics, unaware of her characteristics formed in previous environments. While able to perform socially in her multiple environments, Monica sensed her disconnection and was not sure where she belonged.

In my work with Monica, I found that despite her strengths and abilities, she lacked a basic sense of self and exhibited little empathy. This confounded and intrigued me all at once. While she spoke eloquently about feeling different and excluded from her environment(s), she harshly judged her daughter for being gay and her ex-husband for being sexually assaulted by his father. One might assume that someone who experienced exclusion and alienation would understand another’s experiences with these issues. This was not the case for Monica. Her identity was not complex enough to integrate and understand her own experiences, much less understand the experiences of others. Monica’s preoccupation with my hair, or what may have been perceived as a blatant exhibition of my Blackness, was puzzling and foreign to her. It had not occurred to her that people not only exist in their environments, but help determine them. She also seemed to confuse my role as a social worker,

with my identity as Black woman who happens to be a social worker. The notion that identity and role can be integrated seemed to be a foreign concept.

Dorothy Jones (1990) says the self is both product and potential transformer of society and that self is socially and historically constituted. In addition, the social context of experience has a powerful impact on an individual's internal reality shaping both its conscious and unconscious content thus allowing a person the experience of a self-in-the-world. Monica clearly had many selves (or part selves), but they were not continuous across contexts, and she seemed unable to articulate, differentiate, or integrate them. Her early experiences with caregivers and important others did very little to help her develop a sense of self. She was an outsider from the very beginning, and this continued into adulthood. That she saw herself as an outsider is a very important consideration in that she somehow understood self as separate from environment, yet her self was not formed so that it might be articulated. Monica had very little capacity for self-reflection, and she was unable to identify ways in which she was distinct from others even though she understood herself to be different from others.

Saint Augustine introduced the idea of a private self capable of self-reflection and believed that acceptance and understanding of this private self intimated a love of the self (Modell, 1990). He envisioned the very contemporary idea that self-knowledge leads to self-acceptance, a healthy form of self-love. According to Saari (1991), psychological health can be defined as a "highly developed capacity to create meaning with the result of that capacity being identity complexity" (p. 23). Further, "the more possibilities the individual can envision in any given situation, the more alternatives that person can consider in the selection of behavior. Thus, the possibility of adaptive behavior would be increased by a multifaceted comprehension of the world" (p. 23). In this light, adaptation can be understood as integration of socially acquired symbols that make socially acceptable responses not only possible, but likely. Monica's early caregiving and later experiences precluded the development of her ability to contemplate the objects in her world (they had not been affectively attuned), as well as select behaviors that would contribute to the healthy development of a sense of self and identity complexity.

Monica attended only three sessions, missing several subsequent sessions before finally discontinuing treatment after two months. Despite my intentions and hopes of providing for Monica a holding environment, in which interspsychic exploration could

occur, I believe that like all of her other environments, the therapeutic space was perceived as hostile and inhospitable. I was similar to her in ways that she could not quite understand, and different from her in ways that felt all too familiar, thus reinforcing her belief that there was not a goodness of fit. Monica had a foot in at least two worlds but found grounding in neither of them. Her semblance of identity stood on shaky ground that could neither hold her nor be influenced by her.

## Conclusion

If Mead's (1934) beliefs are accurate that the self is created primarily by society, that one first experiences oneself as an object of others, and that selfhood is not created but bestowed upon the individual from without, then one must wonder what processes occur when, for individuals like Monica, the environment or community is limiting, impinging, exclusive, and/or incongruent with the person's sense of self. Further questions to explore are: What might the development and maintenance of identity complexity look like in a hostile environment for a person who has not adapted to it, or for a person who has not been able to integrate and create meaning within this environment? How do we understand how people develop and maintain identity complexity when participating in multiple environments that are dissimilar in nature and difficult to bridge? If belonging to a community is indeed important and the demands of the community or communities become too difficult to tolerate, how will identity complexity be impacted? As social workers seek to understand and provide services to clients who are struggling through the matrix of identity complexity, these questions should be considered and explored utilizing existing theories and case studies.

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