

## Essential Identity: the Beginnings of an Exploratory Journey into the Worlds of Identity and Doctoral Studies

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### Abstract

This article discusses different theories and interpretations of identity, and applies these debates to two plays *Angels* (2009) by [Pacific Underground](#) and the Court Theatre, directed by Robert Gilbert and *The Bellbird* (2009) performed by the [National Academy Of Singing And Dramatic Art \(NASDA\)](#), directed by Stephanie McKellar-Smith. Through theoretical and more hands on discussions of these theories the complexity of identities and their existence in life and drama is revealed.

I am a PhD student at University of Canterbury, researching performance of cultural identity. I just started my PhD, having arrived in New Zealand very recently and, therefore, it is not only the theory of identity, but the identities in New Zealand and the New Zealand context in general that are new. In this article, I will focus on mapping the main theories of identity and how they can be located in two New Zealand plays.

Identity, debated and contested as it is, has stayed an important part of life. Asking the questions who we are and where do we belong does not happen once in a lifetime but continuously, especially when changes occur. Identity, for many, might seem to be obvious, and the answer might be I am who I am and I belong where I belong? But it is more complex than that; who you are and where you belong are already two identities. People have plural identities, which constantly change and interact with each other and the outside world.

In my research I am looking at how immigrants in New Zealand express their identity through performance. But even before I arrived at looking at performance or theorising identity, I had to stop and ask: what identity am I looking at? Am I looking at all their identities or just an aspect of it? And then suddenly I stopped again: how do I expect to know about their identity if I am unable to clearly explain and understand mine? Not only do I have to ask myself where the subjects speak from, but also where do I, the researcher speak from. In some way, I have become a subject in my research.

This article outlines this discovery and the main theories of identity, using examples from performance.

### Essentialism and Anti-essentialism

#### Essentialism

An essentialist view on identity, which assumes that the core cannot be changed, was the dominant view in academia until the 1970s (Cerulo, 1997). It was based on Durkheim's idea of 'collective consciousness', Marx's theory of 'class consciousness', Weber's notion of 'Verstehen' and Tonnies's concept of 'Gemeinschaft' (Cerulo). Essentialism was based on the 'we-ness' of the group (Cerulo: 386), that is, on the similarities and shared attributes within the group. Collective members were thought to internalise these qualities, and having a collective identity was seen as a unified, singular experience for the group as a whole.

***The Bellbird* a case study illustrating essentialist ideas**



NASDA'S *The Bellbird* with Rutene Spooner as Api, Victoria Levermore as Florence. Photo: Stuart Lloyd-Harris

My very first experience of New Zealand theatre can be seen as expressing this view. It was the performance of *The Bellbird* at the **National Academy of Singing and Dramatic Art** (NASDA), directed by Stephanie McKellar-Smith. The story, based on three letters found by the writer, Stephen Sinclair, one hundred and thirty years after they were written, is the tragic story of a Pakeha woman and a Maori man falling in love, marrying and struggling for survival and acceptance. In the end, the man dies, and the wife is rejected by both the whanau and the local Pakeha community. It is at this point that she writes her letters.

*The Bellbird*, as performed, was very much about identities. Both the woman and the man were willing to change their social identities. The man tried to change his religious identity, rejecting his belief system and following Christian traditions instead. Both of them went through a transformation, affecting their cultural identities: the woman moved closer to the whanau and the man moved out of the community: they both tried to change and compromise. They changed relational social identities. Firstly, they changed their occupation: the woman went from maid to housewife, the man from student to farmer. Secondly, they established a new, close relationship with each other and identified themselves as wife and husband.



NASDA'S *The Bellbird* with Rutene Spooner as Api, Victoria Levermore as Florence. Photo: Stuart Lloyd-Harris

However, the transformations, as suggested in the performance, were not successful. One way to see it is that the couple did not manage to survive because the change required exceeded their capacities. Although the man tried to act like a Catholic, he could not defeat his fear of lizards, and other spiritually endowed animals, deeply embedded in his Maori belief system and upbringing, and the wife could not tolerate such beliefs. He had an affair with a Maori girl, to avoid conflict with his mother, because he and his wife could not have children. The woman tried to make connections with the community, but she still acted like a Pakeha: built a house, decorated the house according to English customs and followed them in everyday practices. In the end, when her husband died she was not part of the community: she lived outside, had not made friends, and did not follow their customs and religion. One way to view the ending is to see it as a failure, based on the logic that even though they tried to change, deep inside they always remained the same. The idea of being the same, and that there is something essential about all of us, about identity reflects essentialist theories of identity. However, this view does not take into account the context and wider environment: the community was willing to tolerate her, but not willing to accept her. They still tried to undermine the marriage, and, although they used her language skills when they needed someone to write to the court in English, they wanted to live unchanged: Maori beliefs, Maori land, Maori traditions, their essence according to essentialist theory.

As mentioned earlier, collective members were thought to internalise the qualities of the group, and having a collective identity was seen as a unified, singular experience for the group as a whole. This, in the context of the play, would be represented by the Maori boy's essential 'Maoriness' and his belonging to the community: his beliefs were so deeply rooted that not only would he be unable to detach himself from his beliefs (the example of the lizard) but agreed on an extramarital relationship in order to have a child and secure his lineage. Essentialism assumes that people and identities have a core, an essence which remains unchanged over time, just like the husband's identity had his Maori belief system at its core, and it was not changeable.

There are other ways to look at the performance: to look at the historical context, the community, the relationships. However, in the performance, essentialism came across as most striking. I wonder: would it come across differently in another performance? Does somebody who is more familiar with the New Zealand context see it differently? In other words, does identity matter when looking at the performance?

## **Anti-essentialism**

Anti-essentialist views challenge essentialist views in the discourse of identity. They negate identity being an unchanging core and call for a more fluid and relative view on identity.

The shift from theories of essentialism to an anti-essentialist point of view took place in the 1980s. Social constructivism, based on the theories of WI Thomas, Peter Berger, Ervin Goffman, Howard Becker and others, rejects categories that propose having essential, core features as the unique property of collective members (Cerulo). Collective ‘becomes a social artefact’ (Cerulo: 387), influenced by cultural scripts and centres of power.

Gender studies had a significant role in developing social constructivist theories of identity. As a result of the problematization of the gender-sex link, the link between biology and sociality, categories were not taken for granted, but, instead, transformations by rituals and practices were acknowledged. Gender studies challenged the dichotomies of man and woman, male and female and let go of primordial roots, and looked at the change into social facts.

Sexual identity has also played a key role in the development of social constructivist theories of identity. Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992) name three steps in collective identity formation when talking about non mainstream groups. These are: the construction of boundaries, serving as a border between dominant and non-mainstream groups, the emergence of shared consciousness and aims, and politicisation processes. Race and ethnic studies also generated debates and theories on social constructivist views of identity.

Postmodernists, although being anti-essentialist, criticise social constructivism for ‘cataloguing identity as a construction process’ (Cerulo: 391) and for not emphasising the role of power in identity formation enough. They call for a view of multidimensional flow on agency, and of the realisation that variation within and between categories is equally important. In their methodology, the emphasis shifts from observations to discourse analysis. Gender studies, similar to social constructivism, play an important role in developing theories of identity. They challenge dichotomies and oppositions, problematise sexual categories and contest sexual hierarchies (Cerulo). It rejects universal claims of identity that are seen as static depictions of social life (Gerson, 2001).

### ***Angels a Case Study Illustrating Anti-essentialist Ideas***



## Pacific Underground's Angels

The play I wish to use to illustrate an anti-essentialist view on identity is *Angels*. *Angels* is a Samoan comedy, written by Tanya Muagututi and Joy Vaele from Pacific Underground, and was directed by Robert Gilbert. Two cousins (Stevie and Sing) are planning a big career in music, but Sing decides to dedicate herself to God instead of fame. The play is a mosaic of memories of the past 20 years, on the birthday of the deceased Stevie, who eventually became a star.

It is a very different play from the first one. It is contemporary and it is about the immigrants, and not the indigenous people and settlers, but identity remains a major issue. Firstly, the story reveals the development of the personal, the 'me' identities of the young girls. It follows their transformation from young girls, through teenagers to adulthood, even though the play does not have a strictly linear narrative, but is a series of mosaics and remembrances. This is where they struggle with their values, the clash between dreams, tradition and reality. Interconnected with this is their religious identity. Religion and practicing religion is presented as very important to Samoan culture. Although all the groups remain religious, the degree to which they associate with the church differs, as well as the importance of religion in their lives. The extent to which these are part of their self-concept is shown as different. If we could magically appear in the world of the play and ask Sing to tell us about her identity (although we would phrase it differently), I think she would list her role as a mother and her role in the church, and her role as a friend, belonging to the community, as three of the main important identities. If we would ask Stevie, she would identify as a singer, as a Samoan and as a friend. What this play tells about identity is that it is changing, and it can be changed, at least the degree to which you claim your identity.



Angels directed by Robert Gilbert

It also shows, how identities are related to each other. The community and the church, Samoan culture and the church, do not seem separate but are interconnected in the play. The idea that all people in the community are Samoan, and they all go to church is very clear and these identities would be difficult to separate in most cases. This interconnectedness makes it difficult to see and analyse them as separate, making the analysis more complicated.

They are not equally important at all times. Does that mean there is always a hierarchy, or are there several hierarchies depending on the context? Would Stevie, when she is in Australia on a tour, introduce herself so: 'I am a Samoan from New Zealand?' Would she only say, 'I am

from New Zealand' or 'I am Samoan'? Back in New Zealand, in her community she would not say any of these. It is also interesting how they could chose occupational or role identities, like I am Sing, or I am a mother.

But what really fascinates me, is how they express these identities. One example of this is that they express their belonging to the community, their friendship, by having a birthday celebration for their deceased friend. In this way, the birthday celebration and memorial becomes more than its function, even more than the sign of their never-ending friendship; it becomes a statement of identity and belonging.

Another example for expression could be when they visit the travelling preacher, who performs a show for them and hundreds of others. They take part in the performance, on the one hand, play their roles, but also reveal parts of their many identities at the same time: Sing hopes for a cure for a little girl and sees the preacher as the messenger of God. In other words, she performs her religious identity. Stevie, on the other hand, is there to sing, identifying and presenting herself as an upcoming singer in the preacher's show.

There are little bits and pieces, Samoan jokes, comments on religion, betrayals and also moments when they stand up for each other and things that matter for them. In a way, when Sing secretly adopts and promises to raise Stevie's daughter, she is expressing her identity as 'best friend', and at the same time a new role identity, that of mother, is created.

## **Beyond Essentialism and Anti-essentialism**

### **The 'identity' crisis**

Although the divide between essentialism and anti-essentialism, even between social constructivist and post-modern discourse, seems relatively clear, when applied to research, as Brubaker (2004) points out, there emerges an 'identity crisis' in social sciences. Hall (2000) argues that identity is 'an idea which cannot be thought of in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all' (Hall, 2000 p. 16). Identity has become one of those debated terms, like authenticity or culture, meaning everything and nothing at the same time. But identity alone, as defined by Brubaker, has five separate, basic meanings in current academic discourse. These are identity as a basis for political action, identity as a specifically collective phenomenon, identity as a core aspect of individual or collective selfhood, identity as a product of social action and, finally, identity as a product of multiple competing discourses. Further, Brubaker divides the understandings of identity as 'strong' and 'weak', the former keeping everyday meanings of identity, the later breaking away from everyday meanings of the word.

### **Thematic categorisation**

An approach I found very useful for the categorisation of identity was a thematic approach. Parekh sees an individual's identity as composed of personal, social and universal human identities. Personal identity is the understanding of a self, a kind of reflection of ourselves. One's personal identity involves choice and is 'relatively stable' (Parekh, 2008 p. 13). Social identity, on the other hand, is seen as in constant change. It represents the ways in which 'individuals situate and orientate themselves in the world' (Parekh p.23). Social identity,

then, has many subcategories such as religious, cultural or role identities. These identities are active and they interact, preventing essentialisation. According to Parekh, in healthy cases this interaction prevents any identity from becoming absolutely dominant, and, thus, it is a key to a balanced individual. The third type of identity Parekh describes is human identity, the difference between humans and non-humans, coming not from biology but from pre-Socratic, morally significant questions. He then notes that the three identities and their sub-identities cannot be separated from each other.

I was thinking how I could give an example of these identities, but kept encountering problems. For instance, for the wife in *The Bellbird*, a few of her personal identities could be being a wife, who likes nature and her hobby is sewing. Her social identity would be a wife, former maid, a Christian, a Pakeha, who now lives among the Maori.

It sounds obvious that personal and social identities vary from person to person, and they change with time and context. However, my own example made me realise that human identities are not universal either. A few weeks ago, there was a news story about a Tongan man, who barbequed his own dog, and he said it is accepted in Tonga. So, whereas it would be very much part of my, or a Pakeha woman's human identity not to eat somebody's pet dog, it was not something he thought would be a immoral or wrong. This was not part of his human identity and would not have been an answer to the question what distinguishes people from animals.

## **More Crises**

For my study, although identities, to begin with, seemed inseparable, research and these case studies showed that they can be looked at separately to some degree, when the other identities are considered as well. For my research, it is social identities that seemed most important. I found that social identities are contested and used in different ways. Brewer (2001) identifies four kinds of social identities based on different theoretical frameworks. She draws on a wide range of disciplines and discourses for her categorisation.

Firstly, person-based social identities are located within an individual's self concept. One asks questions, like 'what kind of person am I?' to find out more about her person-based social identity. Gender, ethnic, cultural and racial identities would belong to this category. However, this description has a resemblance to Parekh's personal as well as social identity.

Brewer then distinguishes relational social identities, the so called 'me' identities, which view the self in relation to others. She lists personal relationships such as familiar and occupational relationships as examples. But according to Hall (Hall in Redman, 2000), viewing the self in relation to others, following the logics of Saussurian linguistics and Deridean deconstruction, is the basis of all identities. It is the 'liminal presence of Others' (Hall in Redman, 2000 p.10) that identities stem from, because they come into being as the subjects seek to distinguish themselves from these "Others."

Brewer then goes on and looks at group-based social identities, which are similar to person-based identities, just from a different angle. Person-based identities offer an out-to-inside perspective (me <- membership) and look at how membership is represented in the individual's self-concept. Group-based identities on the other hand offer an in-to-outside perspective (me -> part of group), and refer to the perception of self as an integral part of

the social unit. These group-based identities then make possible identification of the self with the group as a whole (Thoits & Virshup, in Brewer 2000).

Finally, theories of collective identities are primarily concerned about how group representations are shaped, instead of focusing on meanings attached to group identities. They also refer to how the group wants to be represented and what actions are performed to achieve the representation.

These fit Brubaker's definition as well, as the categories are very similar and their observations on trends in social sciences overlap.

To illustrate Brewer's categorisation and the examples she gives, I will draw on the examples from *Angels*. For the purpose of this categorisation, I will take the case of Sing, who decided not to pursue a career in singing, but remained home and raised Stevie's daughter instead. I will look at her social identity as a mother now.

Sing is a mother on a personal level, and it has an effect on what kind of person she is, on her lifestyle and daily life and her view of herself as a woman. She might have conflicting feelings about herself as a woman or a girl, because she has never been married, in fact, as the play suggests, she never even had a boyfriend. She would also see herself as Samoan and she could tell us that her culture is Samoan or that she is a Samoan New Zealander.

Sing, as a mother then has various relationships, social roles, dictated by society. There are many things a single girl could occupy herself with, which is not seen as appropriate for a mother. In the position towards her parents, she is a single mother now. She could not just 'hang out' with anybody she wants to, because she is a mother now. Or she might compare herself to other mothers: is she doing better or worse?

Sing, as a mother, also has a group-identity that is different from the personal one. Being a mother is a social category; there are legal and financial aspects for instance. Does she get extra income from the government now that she is a mother? Does she pay fewer taxes, because she is a single mother? She belongs to the social category of mothers and it is not her actions alone that count, but also actions of those representing mothers as a social category in society.

Sing, as a mother also has a collective identity, a socially shared image. She would celebrate Mothers' Day and might take part in mobilisations for social action, such as women in the cervical vaccine commercials on television.

## **Is There a Crisis?**

To read these theories like this, they can be neatly folded and seen as parallel to each other. However, because they are parallel to each other, there is always a choice involved. A researcher, in general, would choose one identity and would research and refer to that. Brubaker calls for substitutions for the word identity. But I just wonder, would not substitutions, more contested words and definitions, make things easier? I am in no position to suggest solutions, if there are any for the identity dilemma. However, at this stage of my research, I have arrived at an agreement with myself. The agreement is simple. Identity being

such an amoeba-like subject, not only in real life but also in academia, it clearly refuses being put into ordinary boxes or filing cabinets. I see identity as a broken or rather cheeky filing cabinet: you pull out one drawer, and another opens up, like they are connected. So categories and classifications are useful, but awareness of different understandings of identity and flexibility are useful when tackling identity in research. The agreement, therefore, is that until I am aware of the complexities and differences and I am able to think about them critically, I am allowed to navigate between them relatively freely, and I do not need to berth permanently. This is because clearly sticking to one category only and staying within the box could flatten and limit research. That way, much from the performances could have been lost, if different kinds of identities and aspects were not to be looked at. Similarly, many of the understandings would be inadequate if limits were set already in the very beginning.

Researching expressions of identity requires knowing what theories and categorisations are around and seeing what fits the data, rather than trying to force the data into a chosen theory. Theory should not limit our understandings, but make them clearer and richer. That would mean trying to find or construct a cabinet for the files, rather than squeeze, jam and force the files into an already existing cabinet.

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## **Biography**

### **Kata Fulop**

Originally from Hungary, Kata Fulop is a PhD student in the College of Education at the University of Canterbury. She is researching cultural identities and how these are expressed. This involves an analysis of how Pasifika in New Zealand perform their cultural and ethnic identities through the medium of theatre and how that influences communities, people and the arts. She has degrees from Bristol University in Performance Research and from the Utrecht University in Social Sciences.