abstract: This article introduces a series of research studies that have opted for a ‘structural interactionist’ approach to social identity. It is argued, starting from the categories defined by the macro-social institutions that are used to refer to the social contexts in which individuals live, that actors define, negotiate and claim their micro-social identities out of socially organized interactions in the meso-social relational structures that form personal communities, according to the situations and aims that the actors pursue. This special issue explores different aspects of the complex relationship between personal communities that constitute concrete social networks and identification with abstract imagined communities.

keywords: ethnicity ✦ migration nations ✦ networks and identifications ✦ social network analysis ✦ structural interactionism

The Social Production of Identities: Three Levels of Analysis

The definition of ‘identity’ as a ‘kind of virtual object to which it is necessary to refer to explain certain things, but that doesn’t ever have a real existence’¹ (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 332) does not preclude its importance in social life, but demands careful analytical distinctions when studying it. Otherwise, one runs the risk of falling, willingly or unwillingly, into what would be a performative discourse. So the first step in order to study identities consists in taking a step back from the actual concept of ‘identity’. The notion of identity, because of its essentialist, unifying and reifying connotations becomes analytically sterile. In its place, following the proposition of Brubaker and Cooper (2000), it is preferable to adopt the concept of ‘identification’, which is free from the rigid semantic connotations of the word ‘identity’. Identification refers to processes and activities and not to
This concept also permits us to consider that identifications can vary according to the moment: identifications can be considered as actions that are fundamentally situational and contextual. Also, this concept invites us to specify who are the ‘identifying’ and the ‘identified’ agents, which allows us to establish a distinction between self-identification and identification by others (Dubar, 1992; Goffman, 1997). Self-identifications and identifications by others may not strictly coincide but are in dialectic interaction. Identifications by others can, of course, exert pressure on the self-identifications and vice versa.

That said, when the literature about identifications is examined we find two principal theoretical levels to approach this question. On a macro-social level, history and sociology mainly offer theories on the formation of national identities emanating from the great historical and institutional forces. On a micro-social level, sociology and social psychology propose theories on the processes involved in the development of identifications to social groups on an individual level.

Let us look briefly at some of the ideas of both theoretical levels before proposing an integrated theoretical analytical model that articulates both macro and micro levels to propose a third as an interface: the mesoreticular level in which we examine the specific role of social networks in which individuals are embedded. The structures of these networks and their compositions reflect both the macro-social historical and institutional pressure of the times in which they emerge, and the micro, individual personal decisions of creating, maintaining or abandoning this or that relationship. At the same time, personal networks as communities in which the world makes sense to an individual, are the environments in which the interpersonal influences of concrete identifications act. It is where the meanings of labels proposed by institutions with which we identify ourselves and others are negotiated, opposed, adjusted, filled or emptied. But they are also the place where gaps or alternative discourses that do not correspond to the official labels appear in accordance with the solidarities existing in the networks.

**Macro-Social Theories on Territorial Identifications: Visions from History and Sociology**

On a macro-social level, history and sociology mainly present theories about the constitution of national identities emanating from the great historic forces.

How do territorial ‘identities’ appear? The myth of nationalism proclaims that nations precede states. However, history tells us that the process has been exactly the reverse. It is possible to find evidence of the
existence of states almost 3000 years BC, more or less at the same time as agrarian societies began to develop. However, the idea of nation only dates from the 18th century. Those who situate it earliest would say that it is in the 16th century in England, where some people began to see themselves as ‘English’ (Kohn, 1940), however only a small number share this idea (Llobera, 1995). At that time, only kings and the aristocracy were considered as belonging to a ‘race’, the rest of the population were not considered as having any origins worthy of mention (Mauss, 1968).

Differences, evidently, existed between the traditions and ways of life of different groups of humans, but these were not associated with political and territorial frontiers. On the one hand, the customs of peasants governed by the same king or within a state could vary enormously. On the other hand, the clergy and, separately, the nobility shared languages and codes of behaviour between different states. Thus, the concept of nation first appears linked to the ideological movements that preceded the French Revolution and the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1991; Schnapper, 1994).

Following this, the romantic cultural movements defined national identities, with their heroes, myths, symbols and their ‘essential’ characteristics. However, these did not acquire any political relevance until an elite of militant pioneers of the ‘national idea’ appeared at the end of the 19th century. In fact, it was not until the first half of the 20th century that the notion of nationality acquired the support of the masses, or at least, the support of a part of the masses that the nationalists had always pretended to represent (Hobsbawm, 1991), and which makes this idea look so ‘natural’ nowadays. The process by which this idea has become generalized is similar in different countries. It has been inculcated by the endogenous symbolic violence in the national schools (Schnapper, 1994), by the creation of an imagined community of social communication via the press (Anderson, 1983) and subsequently the television, and by the exogenous physical violence of the universal participation of men in armies and war (Gellner, 1983; Schnapper, 1994; Smith, 1991). It is so much so that on the European continent, as an effect of wars between states, the number of political units decreased from about 500 in 1500 to some dozens at the beginning of the 19th century (Schnapper, 1994). However, and in spite of this reduction of political units caused by war and the efforts of homogenization of their populations, the nationalist idea attributed to Mazzini ‘to each nation a state and only a state for each nation’ has had a relative success in the world. Nielsson (1989) has undertaken the brave exercise of examining the correlation between states and ethnic groups in the world. For his research, he classified 1500 ethnic groups according to the definition of Brass (1976) into 575 ethnic categories and examined their bi-univocal relation with 161
states. If we examine the states, we can see that 28 (17 percent) of them are national states that contain 90 percent of a given ethnic group. However, when we study these ethnic groups, we can see that only 28 ethnic categories, 5 percent of 575, have managed to achieve the romantic ideal of the nation-state. A historical look at this process, Nielsson tells us, reveals that the highest point of the correlation between states and nations is the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, when nationalisms peaked, and particularly in Europe. Thus, considering Nielsson's work, we could affirm that at practically all times there are as many 'inter-national' borders within states as between them.

The most prevalent macro-sociological research studies in the social sciences on the construction of 'identities', be they ethnic, regional, national, European or others, often reflect an approach of sociological analysis in which the institutional changes and the historical forces of different epochs are the great actors, and individuals are seen as reactive. In the approximations in which the main argument is the 'historical socialization', individuals identify with different territories according to their socialization. Different identifications of individuals are seen as a consequence, more or less 'automatic', of the development of the great historical forces in different epochs and contexts (e.g. Schnapper, 1994; Smith, 1991). This is partly due to the dialectic play between identification by others and self-identification, in which there exists a type of external identification that does not find an equivalent counterpart in self-identification and which imposes a great level of constriction: that is, the formalized, codified and objectivized systems of categorization developed by the institutions that hold authority and power. In this sense, the state and the institutions of order are the most important and powerful agents of identification and categorization, as they try to obtain, if not a monopoly, a majority control of not only legitimate physical violence, but also legitimate symbolic violence, which includes the power to name, identify, categorize and enunciate what is what and who is who (Bourdieu and Saint Martin, 1977; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Dubar, 1992; Lavaud, 2000). Brubaker and Cooper consider that the state

is thus a powerful identifier, not because it can create 'identities' in the strong sense – in general, it cannot – but because it has the material and symbolic resources to impose the categories, classificatory schemes, and modes of social counting and accounting with which bureaucrats, judges, teachers and doctors must work and to which non-state actors must refer. (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 16)

It is quite easy to identify great macro-sociological theories in competition with each other that try to explain the causes of national identity and the constitution of national bodies, however we argue with Jones and Smith (2001) that there are relatively few theoretical and empirical efforts
with regard to the different social and individual factors at play and their relative importance in the processes linked to identifications lived by individuals – self-identifications. We examine same propositions available in the literature to date, before introducing our own particular ‘structural interactionist’ approach.

Micro-Social Theories on Territorial Identifications: Visions from Sociology and Social Psychology

It is possible to find theories that try to explain the development of identifications with imagined communities on an individual level both in the field of sociology and in social psychology.

Social psychology proposes theories on the general processes involved in the development of identifications to social groups on an individual level. The main one is, without any doubt, the so-called ‘social identity theory’ (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1986).

This theory provides the conceptual foundations of the processes of identification, and, therefore, of the processes of identification with imagined communities. The theory of social identity states that identifications seem to be a universal process that affects all human beings. The central idea of this theory is that individuals seek to obtain a positive evaluation of themselves and part of this self-evaluation depends on belonging to social groups and the evaluations associated with them. Two dimensions underlie the process of identification. The first is a cognitive dimension of social classification: human beings tend to simplify the environment into groups of people according to the perceived similarities related to their actions, intentions or behaviour. Once the categories are created, individuals emphasize the differences between the categories in order to maintain the cognitive division of the world, beyond the objectivity of this division. The second is an affective dimension, which corresponds to the need to obtain a positive evaluation of oneself derived from positive evaluations (self-assigned or assigned by others) linked to belonging to a social category.

With respect to sociology, it is possible to identify at least two groups of theoretical approaches to the question of territorial identifications: the theory of ‘cognitive mobilization’ and that of ‘rationality of actors’, which explain identifications according to the characteristics of individual actors.

The theory of ‘cognitive mobilization’ is linked to the theory of modernization of Deutsch (1962) and Inglehart (1970) and it is concerned with the socially distributed capacities of individuals according to their social positions. The principal idea here is that the more cognitive capacities an individual has (due to a high level of education or to travel experiences),
and the more the individual mobilizes them (e.g. obtaining information through the media), the more capable she or he will be to understand ‘the wide world’ and thus the more likely to identify with broader territorial communities. However, as is shown by Janssen (1991), the empirical results are ambiguous and tend rather to invalidate than confirm this theory.

Possibly the reason for this failure can be explained by the second theory, the ‘rationality of actors’, given that, with the same cognitive capacities and levels of cognitive mobilization, but with different social positions and different objectives, two actors can find interest (whether it is individual or collective) in favouring identifications at different territorial levels. In this way, certain individuals, given their skills and their social and economic positions, may find it more relevant to develop a regional identification, while others, with other positions and skills, may instead favour a national, European or cosmopolitan identification. Thus, in the same territorial space we can find individuals with similar levels of education and socioeconomic status that defend opposing identifications, each according to their own aims. This approach to rationality assumes that actors have expectations, or at least that they make evaluations of the advantages they might obtain from different possible self-identifications in order to choose those that prove the most advantageous (Díez Medrano, 1995; Hewstone, 1986; Smelser, 1969). Certain authors who follow this approach speak of the particularly important position of elites in moulding the perceptions of the profane upon the costs and benefits associated with the different identifications (Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993) even if they don’t always succeed, as shown in the referendums for a European Constitution in France and the Netherlands in 2005.

**A Macro–Meso–Micro Integrated Framework**

A way to articulate these theories consists in constructing a general structural interactionist framework, following the term coined by Degenne and Forsé (1994), which takes the explanatory diagram of the macro–micro–macro transition of Coleman (1990) as a starting point (see Figure 1). Coleman, taking a methodological individualist approach, proposed explaining phenomena on a macro-social level (in our case, for example, the generalization of identification with Europe) starting from the behaviour of the individual actors on a micro-social level. The macro level is a system under transformation. This imposes the logic of the situation with its opportunities and constraints for actors. These, given their capacity for action and according to their social position, develop behaviours that in one way or another contribute to the transformation of the macro system.
Our personal adaptation of this model to the field of social identifications allows taking into account the fact that identifications do not emerge from a social vacuum, but within a social framework that precedes them. It is possible to distinguish two types of social actors with different social structurations: at the macro level, systems with a high level of organization and power of constraint, which here we call ‘institutions’. These are based on ideological systems, which are equipped with instruments for exercising effective and restrictive pressures. The classifications and codes produced by these systems offer an important framework that structures the possible interactions and that conditions identifications. On a micro level, individuals (considered as rational), according to the available categories, use the strategies of self-identification and identification of others that favour the best positions of interaction possible in order to have access to the resources and aims to which they grant importance (which can be symbolic, economic, emotional, material and so on) and which provide them with favourable evaluations of themselves.

Thus, identifications are at all times subject to the effect of forces, pressures and tensions. At the level of macro-social regulation, such pressure can be designated by the concept of ‘symbolic violence’ or domination (Bourdieu, 1980). At the level of interpersonal relations, this pressure can be called ‘influence’.

Although coming from, a priori, a different theoretical horizon, in this case we can paraphrase Berger and Luckman, who express the question.
of identities in the following terms: identity is, of course, a key element of subjective reality and, as such, is in dialectic relation with society. Identity is formed through social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified or reformulated by social relations. The social processes implied, as much in the formation as in the maintenance of identity, are determined by social structure. Reciprocally, identities produced by the interplay of organism, individual consciousness and social structure react to the given social structure, maintaining it, modifying it or even reforming it. Societies have histories made by men who have specific identities (Berger and Luckman, 1968: 216). In the dialectic play between self-identification and identification by others, the different actors will have broader or narrower margins of manoeuvre and different capabilities of imposing their vision of the world according to their social position (Lavaud, 2000).

The preceding paragraph already suggests the level that is missing in Coleman’s diagram to define the processes of identification. Between the macro level of the institutional systems and the micro level of individual actors, it is necessary to define the meso level that refers to the networks of social relations in which individuals are embedded (De Federico de la Rúa, 2002a; Ferrand, 2002; Lazega, 2003). These constitute the relational contexts in which the dialectic play of self-identification confronted with identification by others is enacted and in which the actors, according to their position in the network, adjust their strategies. Thus, our proposal is that the social relations in the form of social networks in which people are embedded are the interface of belonging to the broader imagined territorial communities.

The perspective of Burt (1982) and Degenne and Forsé (1994: 9–16) applied to identifications is useful to extend and reinforce this model. Institutions define the framework for the global interaction of the system and, therefore, the relevant categories of identification. Individuals are immersed in particular social networks whose structure limit but do not determine the actions that individuals can engage in. The position of actors in the network affects the perception that they have of their aims and motivations. If actors are rational, they will establish strategies and choices in accordance with their aims. The new structure of positions in the social network is an effect that results from interactions of the actors according to the application of their strategies, which, again, modifies the perceptions that these have of their aims and motivations and the margins of freedom they will have to tackle the following interaction and so on, in succession.

Identifications serve to take position in situations of interaction structured by social relations. But identifications are also interwoven in social relations, and are linked to them, so this formulation tends to regard identifications as effects of these social relationships. One should therefore conceive a logical loop, as shown in Figure 2.
The articulation meso–macro is sustained by two other arguments that show that personal communities are crucial to national societies.

The first argument is that the ideological model of the nation is based on models of trust and solidarity present in friendship and lateral kinship (Anderson, 1983; Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984; Kaplan, 2007; Spicker, 2000). Anderson would say that the nation ‘is imagined as a community because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship’ (Anderson, 1983: 7). We find this idea explicitly expressed in the French motto Liberté, égalité, fraternité, in which the supposed fraternity appears at the actual base of the national model. Anderson adds that ultimately it is this fraternity that has made possible the existence of the nation in the last two centuries (Anderson, 1983: 7).

The second argument is that personal relations are crucial, not only as they provide a model for the trust and solidarity that is at the foundation of national ideology, but also because the good functioning of societies in nation-states depends on the concrete fulfilment of the ideal values of the nation: liberty, equality, solidarity, trust and so on in friendship and kinship networks (Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984). Personal communities (personal networks) are the social groups that carry out the ideals of the nation. So, people have in their lives the concrete experience of solidarity, trust, fraternity and other values of the nation. This allows the myth of the nation-state and their values to continue being credible in the eyes of the people, despite the domination and instrumental relations that may structure them.

On the other hand, the articulation between the meso and micro level is established through the argument that personal communities are the reference groups that serve as a base for the transfer of solidarity to the macro-imagined communities (De Federico de la Rúa, 2002b). Returning to the dimensions implied in the identification with social groups specified
by social psychology, the personal communities (social networks) produce (1) the processes of convergence of the norms necessary to obtain similarity in attitudes and behaviours that satisfy the cognitive dimension of identification and (2) the social approval necessary to obtain the positive self-evaluation from belonging to a group, which corresponds to the affective dimension (De Federico de la Rúa, 2003a).

For all these arguments, we propose an underlying hypothesis to several of the research studies presented. Personal communities in the form of personal networks can be studied as a meaningful interface of belonging to the imagined territorial communities.

These ideas have been pointed out by other authors, who also suggest that the feelings of belonging to imagined communities are sustained by the actual belonging to personal communities of solidarity in which the institutional order takes advantage and assumes ownership of the solidarity produced (Duchesne, 1999; Lamo de Espinosa, 1995). However, these have not been empirically tested to relate in a systematic way a specific knowledge between the communities of personal networks in which individuals are immersed with the identifications they claim in relation to imagined communities. While the members of a personal community, source of the relationships of trust and solidarity, are associated to the same imagined community, which happens frequently in the framework of nation-states, it is difficult to test these ideas empirically. To test them it is necessary to compare contexts in which social networks can contain homogeneous relations – in ethnic or national terms – with respect to heterogeneous social networks. These networks can more easily be found in contexts of migration or in contexts of construction or deconstruction of new political units.

Currently, there are few studies that examine identification to imagined communities in terms of the real belonging to personal network communities in a systematic way. These studies are limited to a few specific cases. Some examples are: the study of friendship networks of young Europeans and their identifications with national and European communities (De Federico de la Rúa, 2002a, 2003a, 2005); the study of political discussion networks and the identifications of their members with Spain and Europe (García Faroldi, 2004, 2005, 2006); networks of young Bosnians and their ethnic Serbian, Croatian, Muslim-Bosnian or civic Bosnian identifications (Aguilar, 2005; Aguilar and Molina, 2004); and the networks of best friends for high school students in the US and their identification vis-a-vis teenage ‘crowds’ such as ‘loner’, ‘popular’, ‘nerd’ but also ‘Hispanic’, ‘Asian’, ‘Black’ (McFarland and Pals, 2005). The studies focusing on the other part of the logical loop, the selection processes of creating new ties for personal networks according to previous identification to imagined communities (national or ethnic), are relatively more prevalent (e.g. Baerveldt et al., 2004; Blau, 1994; De Federico de la Rúa, 2003a, 2003b; McPherson et al., 2001).
The contributions to this special issue are intended to make up for the lack of information concerning these processes by exploring, with the help of empirically based research studies, different aspects of the complex relation between the personal communities made up of concrete social networks4 and the identification with abstract imagined communities. A logical continuation of these studies, forming together an emerging field for the study of networks and identifications, would be longitudinal research designs allowing study of the processes of network formation in parallel with that of self-identification in order to disentangle the causes and the effects of both processes. But before wishing for further research, a few words about each article presented here.

The contribution by Baerveldt et al. looks at how identifications play a role in the processes of network formation. In particular, the authors look at the selection of friendship ties among high school students, at intermediate educational levels, in Flanders and the Netherlands that result in ethnic boundaries. Their article shows, first and for both countries, that while minority students have more majority friends, taking availability into account, native students are more inclined than minority students to engage in inter-ethnic friendships. Second, while the Netherlands in 1995 had more of a political climate of tolerance towards immigration than Flanders in 2004, ethnic boundaries seem stronger in the Dutch data than in the Flemish. This could be due to substantive differences in the process of integration of migrants (those in Belgium in 2004 are third generation, while those in the Netherlands in 1995 are second generation), to methodological differences in the definition of ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ students in the two samples, or to more complex effects of different mechanisms of selection acting in multicultural environments. Depending on the percentage of minorities in a given population, either the competition mechanisms identified by social identity theory would be active or, on the contrary, the more inclusive ones hypothesized by contact theory. This last insight is a very interesting one still to be explored in further research.

The articles by Lubbers et al. and Maya-Jariego and Armitage contribute to the understanding of the effects of new personal networks formed by immigrants and commuters on their identifications with their original country, the receiving country or combinations of both. The article by Maya-Jariego and Armitage analyses the process of identification with several imagined communities of two collectives living ecological transitions: immigrants and commuting university students. Both populations studied are moving between two reference social spaces, respectively, the country of origin and that of destination, and the city of residence and the city of study. As individuals spend more time in the new community, their identification with the initial community of belonging decreases in importance. In both cases, the mobile community of
immigrants or commuting students plays a key role as it is intermediate between the two communities.

Lubbers et al. study the relation between five frequent personal network profiles of immigrants in Spain and typical self-identifications in which ethnicity holds a more or less salient place. The different network profiles were constructed on the basis of their composition, including more or fewer family and same nationality members, but also depending on their structural properties such as density, betweenness and number of cohesive subgroups in the network. Networks in which family and same nationality members form one cohesive, dense group tend to reinforce exclusive ethnic self-identifications of migrants. On the other hand, when networks are more heterogeneous in composition, but also show participation in diversified groups, migrants show more plural identifications.

The article by Pizarro can be set apart for it is a far more theoretical and conceptual contribution to a complementary problem then that examined in the preceding articles. In his text, the question addressed is that of the very social identification of individuals by the different social circles to which they belong. Following a classic Simmelian conception of individuals, where individual identities are considered as a property of the network of relations between membership groups or social circles, Pizarro develops and operationalizes the concept of place and network of places. These concepts allow simultaneously the examination of the question of identity and that of equivalence of individuals in a social system. Pizarro compares the wide usability of places to the much more limited one of Galois lattices. He also illustrates its use with classic data describing networks of very small social settings (14 men in a bank wiring room, 18 monks in a monastery) as well as more interesting ‘natural’ sociological contexts such as a small village or the Spanish power elite during its political transition period (1976–81).

Notes

1. ‘L’identité est une sorte de foyer virtuel auquel il nous est indispensable de nous référer pour expliquer un certain nombre de choses, mais sans qu’il ait jamais d’existence réelle’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 332).
2. The definition by Brass of an ethnic group is any group of people different from others in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for a complete division of labour and for reproduction.
3. We have only cited a small number of authors and works compared to the existing literature. Those who wish to find more information can refer to, for example, Anderson (1983), Gellner (1983), Hobsbawm (1991), Herranz de Rafael (1992), Delannoi and Taguieff (1993), Smith (1991), Schnapper (1994) and Thiesse (1998).
4. All these research studies use the structural interactionist paradigm also called structural analysis or social network analysis and in them reference is made to standard concepts such as complete networks, personal networks, centrality indicators, density, composition or structural equivalence. Sometimes authors propose theoretical and methodological innovations in this field. Besides the explanations and justifications that authors provide on the concepts and hypotheses with regard to characteristics of personal communities of studied individuals, readers that would wish to examine this paradigm further will find guidance among others in Chiesi (1980, 1981), De Federico de la Rúa (2005), Di Nicola (1986), Freeman (2004) and Ferrand, Knoke and Kuklinski (1982), Lozares (1995), Lazega (1998), Molina (2001), Merclé (2004), Pizarro (1998, 2000), Requena Santos (1989, 1996), Rodríguez (1995), and Scott (1992). Those wishing to specialize will also find fundamental references in Carrington et al. (2005), De Degenne and Forsé (1994), De Nooy et al. (2004), Doreian et al. (2005), Freeman et al. (1991), Marsden and Lin (1982), Marsden (1990), Wellman and Berkowitz (1988) and Wasserman and Faust (1996).

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