

# Identity and the material – Aspects of a fragile relationship

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## Schlagwörter

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*“When one wishes to study men, one has to look close by; but in order to study man, one has to learn to cast one’s eyes far off; first one has to observe the differences in order to discover the properties.”<sup>1</sup>*  
(Jean-Jacques Rousseau)

## Introduction

More than 40 years ago, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss mentioned that it is hardly possible to deal with ‘identity’ without a critical consideration of the related concepts. Lévi-Strauss intended to find a broader definition of ‘identity’, one that should not be confined to the description of identity features of ‘the other’, but rather to the relation between the anthropologist and the group, he is dealing with. Lévi-Strauss referred to the above quote of Rousseau and challenged thereby the aspect of implicit ‘othering’ when describing the ‘identity’ of whatever group<sup>2</sup>. Similar to what he did with his path-breaking remarks on totemism<sup>3</sup>, he intended to undo with any generalising category like ‘identity’. Instead, he aimed at establishing a structural category of ‘separation’ or ‘distinction’ that is applicable to a different degree in all societies. Obviously, Lévi-Strauss’ idea is highly appealing. But, after all, he was

unable to stop the career of the term ‘identity’ and – to my knowledge – his intention to replace identity by a more general term has never found a greater resonance.

Thus, we still have to ask: What is identity? And: Why is this term’s career so absolutely unstoppable? One reason for its wide appreciation probably has to do with its transdisciplinary character. ‘Identity’ – much alike ‘culture’ and ‘agency’ – is a typical ‘travelling concept’<sup>4</sup>. It cannot be contained in the realm of one single discipline. Instead, it has equal rights but different understandings in psychology as well as in anthropology, history and sociology. It seems as if the shift from one discipline to another regularly strengthens the impact of the term. The multiplicity of meanings and the huge range of different usages render the term so powerful that it overcomes the inherent weakness regarding the definition.

1 ROUSSEAU 1998, 305.

2 BENOIST et al. 1977, 16.

3 LÉVI-STRAUSS 1962.

4 BAL 2002; NEUMANN/ NÜNNING 2012.

However, my contribution shall not dwell in pure criticism against the concept of ‘identity’. Instead I shall start with the reference to a few basic but important meanings of the early usage of identity. This is not intended to substitute a definition in the sense of the term, but it contributes to highlight some core features of ‘identity’. After that, the following parts of this contribution are dedicated to some metaphors of identity, as they have recently been used in anthropology and cultural studies.

By juxtaposing these metaphors, which had been presented originally in order to operationalise identity, I show some trends in current usages of the concept. It is possible to perceive these metaphors as ‘manuals’ that instruct the theoretically less inclined users on how to use ‘identity’ when dealing with material culture. After shortly presenting these metaphors, I shall ask in the last section: Do these images contribute to a different and more complex understanding of material culture? In conclusion, I argue that this comparison generates a new perspective on material culture and enables the researcher to develop a more differentiated view on ‘identity objects’, especially on its multiple meanings.

Before I engage in a more detailed discussion of the meanings of ‘identity’, I would like to add a personal note. For sure, I have encountered the term ‘identity’ many times since I work in academia. As a matter of fact, the term is quite popular amongst the students of anthropology, although it is used very often in a naïve and essentialising manner. On a regular basis, I did reject such simplifying uses of identity and highlighted the term’s limitations by comparing it with the notion of ‘ethnicity’. By referring to Frederic Barth, the differences seem to be obvious: Whereas ‘identity’ is something negotiable and contextual, ‘ethnicity’ is significantly closer to history and long term processes<sup>5</sup>.

It appeared to me that identity is somehow a product of a shrinking process, making out of a strong concept (‘ethnicity’) a weaker one, something that does not require any more to consider the broader image. Still in the same logic, I considered ‘identity’ as a profiteer from the increasing methodological complexity. This challenge consists in the paradigm of doing holistic investigations on society, one that would draw in clear lines the collective aspects of what had been called “we-group”, long time ago by Max Weber<sup>6</sup>. In short, I evaluated the rise of identity as a by-product of the decline of ‘ethnicity’ in the recent history of anthropology. In the sense of Thomas Kuhn<sup>7</sup> the move from ethnicity and towards identity may be considered as a classical paradigm shift.

Still in the same vein, the loss of confidence in the scholarly concept (‘ethnicity’) appeared to me as the motivating factor for most anthropologists to turn towards identity. Today I have to acknowledge that this view might have been unjust. Approaching to the study of culture as a reflexive project obliges us to re-evaluate the role of identity. The increasing usage of identity is not simply the ‘flip side’ of the destruction of another concept, but in the first place an articulation of a current trend in society. Using identity in order to explain differences and specificity is not a thoughtless or naïve practice, but rather an outcome of the evolution of how society is perceived nowadays. Jean-Claude Kaufmann has formulated this very nicely and polemically by urging cultural scientists to leave the “empty halls of academic engagement with cultural complexes” and allow themselves to go where many people are speaking in their own state of mind<sup>8</sup>. This is namely, where people use the thorny, blurred concept of identity, which has so far not received any clear definition.

## Preliminary remarks: Freudian perceptions preceding the career of identity

Doubtlessly, it is a reasonable starting point to refer shortly to a definition which might be placed at the origin of modern thinking about identity. At least the author, Sigmund Freud, should be considered as an authority in the field. Although Freud did not deal extensively

with ‘identity’, we can take his notes on the notion of ‘Ego’ as a point of departure for the modern concept of the term. If we hypothetically equate the different aspects of the psychoanalytical ‘Ego’ with the capacity to articulate an identity, then we can draw some indica-

5 BARTH 1969.

6 WEBER 1972.

7 KUHN 1962.

8 KAUFMANN 2004.

tions from Freud’s writings. Freud is of particular relevance on this behalf, because he stresses the instability of the ‘Ego’<sup>9</sup>.

During the timespan of his publications, Freud subsequently developed several different concepts of the ‘Ego’<sup>10</sup>. Whereas he did equate the ‘Ego’ with the ‘me’ in his early writings, he proposed a further differentiation after 1920. From that moment on, Freud called the ‘Ego’ an “Organisation of imaginations”. With that, Freud referred to a kind of physiological facilitation effect. Well established associations receive sufficient endogenous energy for stabilising themselves. The neuronal structure corresponds with the perception of a stabilised ego. For Freud, there were a number of limiting or enabling vectors of ‘Ego’ like: 1. unconscious, preconscious, conscious; 2. Id, Ego, Super-Ego.

Some of these terms are clearly separated from the ‘Ego’. Obviously, the ‘Super-Ego’ cannot be the ‘Ego’! Other terminological distinctions are less clear. Freud

suggests that the ‘Ego’ has an important role for the theory of the neurosis: In this context, the ‘Ego’ constitutes a blocking of one’s desires. The ‘Ego’ can be overshadowed by an ‘Ideal-Ego’, whereas the ‘Ideal-Ego’ is not identical with the ‘Super-Ego’.

Jean Laplanche, who has given a comprehensive synthesis of the different aspects of the Freudian ‘Ego’ himself, presents a metaphor in order to summarise his understanding of how Freud defined the ‘Ego’: Following Laplanche, the ‘Ego’ is a living vesicle, protected by a thick bark to the outside<sup>11</sup>. The metaphorical bark equates the organs of perception, which limit the influence of the environment. The ‘Ego’ is never simply an image of experienced stimuli. Rather, it selects, can independently determine its reactions, increase or decrease sensitivity. The basis of this metaphor points to the fact that Freud himself in his description oscillated between heteronomy and relative autonomy of the ‘Ego’.

## Some more metaphors for identity

It is striking how frequently the term ‘identity’ is adopted by referring to metaphors. Using metaphors seems to be a safe way to grasp the concept without determining what is precisely meant. Therefore, I have chosen to present in the following a small collection of metaphors and thereby engaging in a comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of the various metaphors. I do not suggest a critical evaluation simply by pointing to the range of different metaphors. I intend to make explicit the sometimes-implicit connotations of the images used for describing ‘identity’. According to Lakoff and Johnson metaphors should be evaluated as creative tools; they have the capacity of extending the range of meanings of the term in question<sup>12</sup>. More in particular, I am interested in such metaphors that highlight processes of ‘establishing an identity object’ or, in contrast, to avoid the establishment of an objectification of identity (*Fig. 1*)<sup>13</sup>.

It is not exaggerated to say that current metaphors have not added much to the already mentioned one. After dealing extensively with Freud’s definitions of ‘Ego’, Laplanche, who is an outstanding expert for Freud’s *oeuvre*, concedes that the opacity of the term might be a significant advantage, contributing to its current populari-

ty. As a matter of fact, nobody exactly knows what identity is<sup>14</sup>.

However, there is one aspect shared by most scholars using the term nowadays: They assume that identity should be conceptualised in the plural form as a rule. Every individual has several identities, at least in the postmodern era, but most probably since ever. Which partial identity achieves specific relevance at which time depends on the circumstances like the social environment, but also the priorities of the individuals themselves. Similar to the vesicle with the bark, every person may react in some contexts visibly whereas he or she remains tacit in others. To have several identities means to have the freedom to switch between different identities, but also the obligation to adopt the right identity at the right moment. This is the basis of all metaphors. The difference between them is related to when and to which degree such changes between identities are possible. Each metaphor suggests different requirements for identity shifts.

A quite provoking but thoughtful metaphor has been used by Klaus Müller in his book entitled “The Magical Universe of Identity”<sup>15</sup>. At a first glance, lumping two

9 LAPLANCHE / PONTALIS 1967, 189.

10 CORBEY 1991.

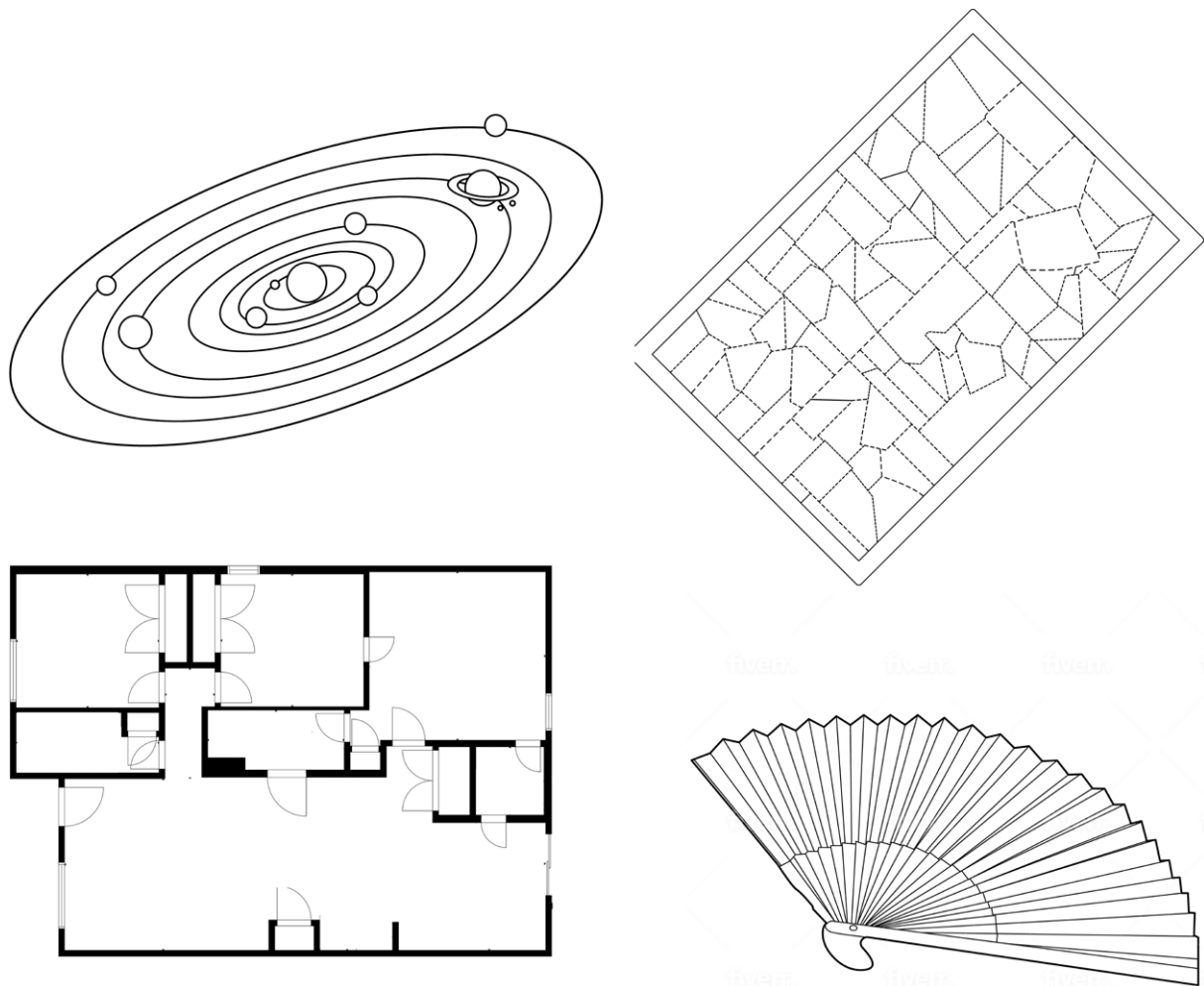
11 LAPLANCHE / PONTALIS 1967, 191.

12 LAKOFF / JOHNSON 1998.

13 THEWELEIT 2015.

14 LEVE 2011.

15 MÜLLER 1987.



1 Metaphors of identity (from top left to bottom right): Identity as ‘universe’ (MÜLLER 1987); identity as ‘patchwork’ (KEUPP et al. 1999); identity as ‘multi-room apartment’ (THEWELEIT 2015); identity as ‘fan’ (FLÉTY 2011).

words with highly diffuse meanings together might not appear as an appropriate tactic in order to define ‘identity’. However, Müller’s “Magical Universe” can be conceived as a quite strong metaphor, including the aspect of imagination (magic) and the ubiquitous (the universe). Identity, like magic, is something to learn and to gain control over. Everyone thinks that he/she has an identity and most of us consider themselves as managers of their own identity. This is the magic-side of identity. To put it in different words, one might even consider identity as an illusion, however an illusion that you have to have, because you are expected to do so<sup>16</sup>.

With regard to the members of any given society, we can assume that ‘having an identity’ is a feature available to all of them. The profile of the identity of individuals might be sharp or obfuscated, similar to the clear or blurred observation of planets and other elements of the

universe. The universe is a representation of an ordered space, including quite different elements, like solar centres, planets and secondary satellites, like the moon. Applying this to identity highlights the regularity of identity as a phenomenon. Everyone has it, although its visibility is quite different. There is no society with equal identities for every member, like the solar system consisting of unequal elements. The regularity of the planetary orbit relates to the identities in the kinship system, with the emplacement in the village etc.

What is particular of this metaphor is the astonishing stability of different identities in society. According to Müller, there is no radical change of identity. There are no conflicts. From a distance, those identities, which are not so much gleaming, are overarched by the strong visibility of the solar system as a whole, which equates the collective identity of the cultural group. From a dis-

16 BAYART 2005.

tance, the group identity hides the different individual identities.

A second, fairly popular metaphor refers to the patchwork. One of the authors presenting this metaphor is Heiner Keupp, a sociologist and psychologist<sup>17</sup>. At a first glance, a ‘patchwork’ is frequently perceived as something composed, consisting of different parts. The process of combining these parts, attaching one element to another – as it is done when fabricating a quilt – does not lead to the elimination of the uniqueness of each element: Even after combining the different pieces, it is still possible to identify each of them.

There is another, even more interesting connotation of the patchwork, related to the necessity to combine different elements. Still within the metaphor one could say: it is impossible to be satisfied with a simple, straight or uniform appearance. Quilting together is a basic activity of every modern individual, when managing his or her identity. Implicitly this refers to a particular kind of scarcity. One must select carefully from different sources in order to establish his or her individual pattern of one’s identity. The paradigmatic activity of selecting refers to consumption and more specifically to what every consumer has to do in a department store or at the market: He selects between the commodities offered there. According to the rules of the market he selects whatever offers the maximum of use value or symbolic value. The same applies to elements of identity<sup>18</sup>: it is an obligation to select what appears appropriate.

The metaphor of a patchwork is based on the assumption that one simple, straight or uniform identity is not sufficient. Instead everyone has to combine to assemble and to organise different partial identities. Reflection about identity, strategic work and planned activity seems to be implicit elements of this metaphor. Individual agency is the key, and Keupp himself uses the notion of ‘identitary work’ and the achievement of synthesising one’s identity<sup>19</sup>.

Still another metaphor is the idea of ‘spaces of identity’. This refers to an image representing every individual as dwelling in a multi-room apartment of identity. This imagined apartment has chambers, each of them differently designed and representing part of his identity. Similar to the patchwork metaphor, the changing from one partial identity to another is very well possible. As explained by Klaus Theweleit, it is even thinkable to close some doors, at least temporarily<sup>20</sup>. One might think that this is the image that offers the maximum of freedom of choice for the individual. However, there is one limita-

tion: Nobody can be simultaneously in two rooms. Following this metaphor, identity is an ‘either-or’ – although there might be a lot of choices, depending on the size and the number of rooms in the apartment.

I did find one ultimate metaphor in a contribution of the French anthropologist Laura Fléty<sup>21</sup>. She uses the image of a ‘fan’. According to this idea, every individual has many identities. Everyone has the capacity to fan his identities in the appropriate moment. The ‘fan of identities’ is the strongest statement with regard to the agency of the individual actor. It is similar to the apartment, insofar, as different aspects of identity can be shown one after the other. The specificity of this image refers to the capacity to close the fan, not to show any identity at all. Fléty introduced this metaphor in the context of her research with adolescents in Bolivia. Obviously, for younger people it is a frequent practice not to boost a specific identity at whatever moment, but rather to carefully choose the appropriate moment of showing who they are.

It is on purpose that this metaphor is at the end of this little kaleidoscope of images, because it implicitly represents the strongest bias towards individual agency of all approaches to identity I dealt with. Starting with the image of Freud/Laplanche these metaphors implicitly refer to an increasing degree to the idea of ‘identity management’. There is a strong voluntarist moment in these images, referring to the potential of the members of society to design, to compose or make strategic use of identity. The short list, from (1) the vesicle, to (2) magical universe, to (3) patchwork, (4) apartment, and finally the (5) fan, constantly assumes a considerable flexibility of the individual. None of these concepts takes into consideration that, at different moments of an individual’s life cycle, the degree to which identity may be intentionally changed differs considerably. Obviously, identity is perceived as something more flexible for younger individuals compared to those with a higher age. Most probably it is easier to change identity for a member of the elite than for others from the middle class.

Most probable, in many historical contexts, there was no choice of identity for the individual at all. Although we have no tool for measuring the freedom to define the individual orientation with regards to norms and values, we can assume that this was differing throughout history. This is not to say that the metaphors presented here only fit for the postmodern individual. It is very well possible that there have been moments in the

17 KEUPP et al. 1999.

18 JOHN 2006.

19 KEUPP et al. 1999, 243–245.

20 THEWELEIT 2015.

21 FLÉTY 2011.

past, where people had a choice, and people with different identities lived together very well.

Although one might find quite some more metaphors, the issue at stake here has become clear. All images presented here refer to combination, selection and change. Differences are just on the level of modalities of change and with regard to the question how to show

identity at a particular moment. Undeniably, there is a bias toward the overestimation of individual agency and voluntarism inherent in many of these images. Scholars of identity should be warned against this bias. They should carefully explore the degree of freedom in every historical or cultural context.

## Material Culture and Identity

Most probably the reader following my argument until here will now ask himself, why I referred to the fragility in the title of this contribution, although most of the metaphors presented here dominantly deal with flexibility. In view of the freedom of flexible choice that is included in the metaphors presented here, referring to a fragile relation seems to be a misrepresentation of the potentials of identity. However, taking my warning against the bias of voluntarism serious, it is this voluntarist bias that constitutes a crack in the images. Material culture plays a crucial role in undermining the idea of seamless flexible connections between the individual and his identity. For sure, things have meanings, and therefore, material items associated with a person can contribute to transmit message about this person's identity. However, if we understand the meanings of things as permanent signals in a semiotic system, in which other signals (text, speech) are much shorter, then the identical thing-meaning is just a very weak, opaque signal.

Without question, there are quite many 'identitary objects' in most people's life-worlds, as has been eloquently shown by Donald Winnicott<sup>22</sup>. But such a status ascription can only be valid for a limited amount of time. How can we determine the duration and intensity of such a meaning with regard to any group of persons? These are questions that are of utmost importance in describing identities that are relevant not only for individuals but rather for social groups like ethnic groups.

How is it possible to conceptualise any object as an item providing an identitary value for a collective with a minimum of time depth? Is it possible to give a precise explanation on the process of acknowledging such a quality through time? Anthropology can provide here some concepts, explicitly dealing with material culture and identity. However, both concepts which I shall present in

the following are still part of an ongoing debate and therefore should be adopted in a critical manner.

The first approach had been suggested by Wilhelm Mühlmann 40 years ago, probably inspired by Frederic Barth's "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries"<sup>23</sup>. Mühlmann introduces the term 'limitic structure' and stresses thereby the aspect of negotiation of social identities<sup>24</sup>. According to his approach, every group 'chooses' a particular set of objects or bodily adornment or something similar that achieves then – after some years – the status of a boundary marker. Using these objects and presenting them as relevant for one's own culture engenders a kind of idealisation. Subsequently, these objects are not only accepted as status markers by the members of this one group but also acknowledged as such among the neighbouring groups.

Although the concept of the 'limitic structure' has been adopted by other anthropologists<sup>25</sup> and scholars of ancient cultures<sup>26</sup>, it has some serious shortcomings. The first is that it implicitly assumes the dominance and the assertion of standardised statements in discourses. As a matter of fact, many things once declared as identitary objects never really achieve this status. Neither Mühlmann nor his followers can explain why the 'limitic structure' is successful in some contexts and fails in others. The second weak aspect of this concept is the inability to explain cultural change. Certainly, the *Lederhosen* would feature as a 'limitic structure' that distinguishes Bavaria from the rest of Germany. But how can it be explained that this item is not what most Bavarians would acknowledge nowadays as something to be used? The object of identity from the past has ceased to be of interest nowadays, when considering the original everyday embedding.

22 WINNICOTT 1953; MEYER-DRAWE 2003.

23 BARTH 1969.

24 MÜHLMANN 1985, 19–20.

25 SCHUSTER 1996, 78; ANTONI 2013.

26 ASSMANN 1992, 153; MÜLLER 2005.

There is another theory about how things can achieve the status of an identity marker for a collective. This theory, named ‘Costly Signaling Theory’, draws on the ethnographic study of hunters and gatherers. A careful observation of the economic activities of such groups revealed that there is no direct relation between the economic efficiency and the appreciation of some specific activities<sup>27</sup>. This applies in particular to hunting. Facing the risk of total failure on any day, it would be rational not to engage in hunting, but rather to focus on gathering, which is the more efficient and reliable strategy of generating the necessary daily provision. Despite its inherent unreliability, hunting is held in esteem. Polly Wiessner, who has investigated on this phenomenon, suggests that the rationale of hunting is its value as a signal<sup>28</sup>. In her interpretation hunting is a costly activity that indicates the trustworthiness of the people. Accordingly, you can better trust people who are able to produce enough surplus in order to practice hunting.

The ‘Costly Signaling Theory’ is also relevant for valuable objects in other societies. Items like the crown jewels are extremely expensive, economically senseless things, which can only be justified as symbols of power. Only things of immeasurable value are suitable over long time to create trust in the ruling elite. The value of identity is linked to the prerogatives and coordinating roles of the powerful, and even more to the objects they display. Furthermore, this theory is quite well applicable with regard to religious practices: the construction of temples and shrines is economically absurd. But when a community manages to establish these elements of extravagance, it confirms its trustworthiness<sup>29</sup>. The religious community implicitly communicates with such monuments: “Our surplus is sufficient to build a cathedral without compromising the foundation of existence”.

The more complex the religious rituals are, the more people are ready to trust the priests<sup>30</sup>.

More recently this theory had been applied on museum displays. In the context of the ongoing debate about the exhibition mode in the new Musée du Quai Branly, Jean-Marie Schaeffer explains with this theory, why visitors can appreciate the aesthetics and the value of things even if they know little or nothing about the culture of the origin<sup>31</sup>.

Taking together these interpretations, it is only one step to a theory of the creation of objects of identity: Whenever you observe an extremely valuable object, then the specific effort in generating this object is obvious to (most) observers. This refers to the value of materials, to the work invested and to the careful production. If the observer is able to acknowledge the outstanding character on these aspects, he will inevitably assume that such objects have a message with regard to the group, to which the producer belongs<sup>32</sup>.

Thus, this theory might resolve the issue about the stability of the identity object. However, it is no less ‘brittle’ than the others. How can a viewer determine the authenticity of costly signalling? We all know that the authenticity of many art objects, including those of precious stones and gold, is only recognisable to the expert. Probably the authors of this theory confuse shared expertise with identity marking. Or, asked the other way around: can one assume that the naive and untrained viewer always notes the ‘value’, i.e. the core aspects of costly signalling? More in particular, the field of religious practices shows that sometimes the opposite is true. The history of relics, very often simple everyday objects like a splinter of wood, shows, how apparently worthless things may achieve the highest degrees of adoration.

## Conclusion: Flexibility of identities and fragility of the relations to the material

On the one side, this contribution has shown several metaphors for identity. To differing degrees, these metaphors explain, how identities can be magical, partial, composed from different sources, shown or hidden. The common feature of these metaphors is to highlight the

flexibility of the relation between the individual and his – mostly multiple – identities. Based on a comparison of the metaphors, the bias on freedom of choice of identity as well as on individual agency have been underlined. As a matter of fact, history teaches the faultiness

27 WOOD 2006.

28 WIESSNER 2002.

29 BRESSLER/ SOSIS 2003.

30 IANNACCONE 1992.

31 SCHAEFFER 2009.

32 HUANG et al. 2011.

of such assumptions. In quite many contexts of the past and of current days, individuals have much less options to 'select' an identity than these images want to make us believe.

On the other side, this contribution has presented two concepts on the establishing and relevance of material items to collective metaphors. The 'limitic structure' (Mühlmann) and the 'costly signalling' (Wiessner) claim to explain how particular material objects achieve the status of collective identity markers, independently of historical specificities and cultural differences. However, it has also been shown that these theories are shortcoming with regard to their claim of universality. For sure, there are many things that have been widely acknowledged as identity objects for societies and other social groups. But it seems as if, for such a status ascription, there are more requirements than the two last theories want to make us believe. Something more is required: It needs particular historical moments and cultural settings in which arrangements of things, prior knowledge of them, and the willingness to articulate belonging to a social group, are made, and thus transform certain objects into identity markers. I would call these aspects coincidences, i. e., the simultaneous occurrence

of specific features that enable a material object to become an identity marker – very often only in retrospective.

It is futile to search for a universally applicable concept on how material culture becomes an identity marker. The multiplicity of meanings, so much highlighted by the metaphors, becomes a challenge when one intends to pin down whatever object as an identity marker. The polysemic character of material culture contradicts the idea of a stabilised attribution of identity to an object and the individual or group. If objects were paintings in scratched wax, into which 'identity' could be simply engraved, it would not be necessary to deal with material culture at all.

The brittleness of the identity relationship, the constitutive ambiguity, and the changeability of things is what makes material culture a particular challenge to scholarly description. It is this fragility that compels us to engage in a thorough study of things. At the same time, however, this uncertainty also opens up a separate field of study that makes material culture a terrain full of discoveries and the investigation of things appear as a worthwhile topic of research. This is especially true with regard to their value as objects of identification.

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Fig. 1: Author.

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## Abstract

### Identity and the material – Aspects of a fragile relationship

Identity faces two challenges: It appears to be too widely used, and also quite too loosely defined. Therefore, this article starts with a reflection of Freud's original notion of the 'self' and then presents some current metaphors, like patchwork, the multi-room apartment, the magical universe and the fan. The article addresses questions of agency and voluntarist approaches to culture, implicitly contained in these metaphors.

Then, two uses of identity are presented, establishing a link to material culture. The first, developed by Wil-

helm Mühlmann, is the 'limitic structure'. It assumes that identity is especially associated with those objects that are in a context of demarcating difference. The second is linked to behavioural economics. This concept, labelled as 'Costly Signaling Theory', suggests that the materials and labour invested in producing prestigious objects constitutes a universally recognisable feature. Whenever people in the presence of such items perceive the quality 'costly', they will acknowledge the identity value.

## Zusammenfassung

### Identität und Material – Aspekte einer fragilen Beziehung

Das Konzept der Identität steht vor zwei Herausforderungen: Erstens ist der Begriff zu weit verbreitet, und zweitens ist er nur schwach definiert. Daher beginnt dieser Artikel mit einer Reflexion über die mögliche Herkunft und beschreibt zunächst Freuds ursprünglichen Begriff des „Selbst“, um daran anschließend einige aktuelle Metaphern vorzustellen. Diese sind „Patchwork“, „Mehrzimmerwohnung“, das „magische Universum“ und der „Fächer“. In der Analyse dieser Metaphern geht es um die damit implizit verbundenen Aussagen über die Handlungsfähigkeit des Einzelnen bezüglich seiner Identität und um die in diesen Metaphern enthaltenen Probleme einer voluntaristischen Annäherung an die Kultur.

Im letzten Teil des Beitrags werden zwei Verwendungen von Identität vorgestellt, die eine Verbindung zur materiellen Kultur herstellen. Die erste, die von Wilhelm Mühlmann entwickelt wurde, ist die „Grenzstruktur“. Sie geht davon aus, dass Identität insbesondere mit jenen Objekten assoziiert wird, die in einem Kontext der Abgrenzung oder Differenzbildung stehen. Die zweite Verwendung von Identität ist mit der Verhaltensökonomie verbunden. Dieses als „Costly Signaling Theory“ bezeichnete Konzept legt nahe, dass die Materialien und die Arbeit, die in die Herstellung prestigeträchtiger Objekte investiert werden, ein universell erkennbares Merkmal darstellen. Wann immer Menschen in Gegenwart solcher Objekte die Qualität als „kostspielig“ empfinden, werden sie deren Identitätswert anerkennen.