

Using Kenneth Burke's Concept of Identification

By John R. Edlund

Have you ever watched a movie or read a book in which you “identified” strongly with the main character? This is what Kenneth Burke means by “identification.” We want to be like characters we admire. But this is also true in real life.

I took up the topic of Kenneth Burke's concept of “Identification,” in a previous post, “Identification and Division in the Current Crisis.” In this post, I want to delve further into the concept and explore some possible uses of the concept.

Identification and Division

Burke notes that “Identification,” (and rhetoric itself) is necessary because there is division. In *The Rhetoric of Motives* he says,

Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. (22)

“Division” is our natural state. However, humans are also social creatures. We form families, tribes, communities, nations, alliances, and movements. Each of these groupings has ways of signaling membership and recognizing outsiders. Problems arise when different groups want to occupy the same territory, or use the same resources. But where there is division, we can try to overcome it by finding common ground.

It is likely that some identification is unconscious. We see or hear a person and we immediately “identify” with them. They seem to be like us in some way, or to be someone we would like to emulate or believe, but we don't know exactly why. It might be gestures, a tone of voice, a remembrance of someone we admire who is similar in some way. But identification can also be consciously attempted.

Current Politics

We see this in our current politics. A politician has a core “base” of supporters who think like she does. These people strongly identify with their candidate. However, it is usually the case that the “base” is not enough to win the election. The candidate has to find ways to appeal to a larger group, without alienating her base. She has to find ways to signal to other groups that she is one of them too. Sometimes this involves using terms that have one meaning to the base, but have another to an outside group. This strategy is often called a “dogwhistle.” A “dogwhistle” is a whistle that when blown

produces a sound that is too high pitched for humans to hear, but can be heard by dogs, which can hear a higher frequency range. In politics, by analogy, a “dogwhistle” is term that sounds positive to the base, but neutral to outsiders, who may actually disagree with the implications it has for the base if they understood them.

Identification is not just in politics, however. It is part of persuasion in schools, workplaces, corporate boardrooms and in the news. It is part of families and communities. It is even part of friendships. How does it work?

Tracking Identifications

One way to think about this is to track ways to signal identification. A short list might include:

- Clothing including uniforms
- Colors such as gang colors, school colors, red states and blue states, Dodger blue and Angel red
- Symbols such as flags, insignia, designs, logos
- Images and memes
- Words identified with particular viewpoints (including "dogwhistles")
- Slogans, maxims, and stock phrases
- Gestures such as salutes and handshakes
- Associations with occupations, regions, social classes

Of course, there is some overlap in these categories.

Military uniforms have a long history. At a very basic level they function to help soldiers tell friend from foe and combatants from civilians. Military organizations also have various badges and insignia that indicate rank and achievements. The uniform and various attachments signify to all that this individual is a member of this organization and what role they perform in it. Of course, members of this organization are more skilled in interpreting these signals than outsiders, which increases the insider/outsider effect of identification.

Outside of the military, uniforms and other clothing choices can help observers tell employees from customers, students from teachers, and identify members of social groupings such as athletes, “goths” or other groupings defined by choices in music, sports, gaming, or other cultural activities. Of course, if an individual attempts to identify with a group by wearing its clothing, but gets it wrong in some way, that will unintentionally signal outsidership. There is nothing more embarrassing than attempting to identify with a group and failing.

Of course, symbols such as flags and logos also define groups. Recently, there has been considerable controversy about the Confederate battle flag, the “stars and bars.” Does it signify “southern pride” or racism and slavery? Does it unify through identification or divide? The answer will probably be found by exploring what groups want to be identified with the symbol.

Internet memes are now a powerful way of signaling identity. Images from films and other media are combined with short phrases to make concise points that often signal a specific point of view.

Inducing Identification (The Ethos Move)

An interesting exercise is to read an article or listen to a speech with identification in mind. We might ask

- Who is the audience (or audiences) that the writer/speaker wants to persuade?
- What are some of the things that this audience identifies with?
- What moves does the writer/speaker make to identify with this audience?
- How successful is the writer/speaker in getting the audience to identify with them? What goes right and what goes wrong?

Responding to Identification (The Pathos Move)

Another exercise is to analyze your own response to an article or speech. We might ask

- What are some of the groups I identify with? What are some of the things that I associate with those groups?
- Do I identify with this writer/speaker? Do I feel part of their group? Why or why not?
- What moves does the writer/speaker make to try to win my identification? How do I react to these moves?
- What could this writer/speaker do better to make me identify with them?
- How much does identification influence my willingness to accept their arguments?

Recognizing False Identifications

Sometimes attempts at identification simply don't work. The banker in a cowboy hat does not make a convincing member of a group of cattle ranchers. The white politician who doesn't know how to eat a tamale is unsuccessful in convincing a Latino group that he is simpatico. The democratic politician from Massachusetts looks ridiculous wearing a helmet and sitting in a tank.

However, sometimes identifications are consciously deceptive. They are an attempt to fool the audience into believing that the writer/speaker is something they are not.

For example, from sea stories by Patrick O'Brian I learned that in the 18th century, it was considered a legitimate ruse of war to fly a false flag when encountering and approaching an enemy warship, **as long as the true flag went up before a shot was fired**. Many English warships were captured French ones because the French built better ships, but the English sailed them better, so this ruse often brought victory. The French saw a French ship flying a French flag. Then suddenly they saw an English

ship and an incoming broadside. But firing a shot under a false flag was a court martial offense, in any navy. It was against the rules of war and highly dishonorable.

In our society, is it ever acceptable to pretend to be someone or something you are not by using the terms, symbols, and other signals of identification of another group? If so, under what circumstances? I'll leave that up to the reader.