

# CONCEPTUALIZATION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN INTEGRATION

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**Abstract** This paper represents the starting point of my dissertation research on the conceptualization of collective identity in integration. Focusing on the Southeast Asian region, the study aims to provide empirical contribution by applying existing analytical frameworks on identity to the ASEAN example, and to provide theoretical contribution by testing the explanatory power and limitations of existing conceptual frameworks of collective identity. This paper represents a basic literature review of the various concepts and frameworks of identity available to International Relation (IR) scholars. From the literature review, I seek to gauge whether such concepts are sufficient in explaining collective identity formation for integration between nation-states. Works on collective identity have largely been developed within the context of nation-building, in other words, the formation of national identity. The units being “collected” are the different racial, social and cultural groups within the boundaries of a nation-state. I argue that for integration studies where nation-states are the units, we need to expand the concept of collective identity and adjust the analytical framework we use. With that in mind, I introduce a model – the “Border-Unity” model, which may be used to analyze collective identity construction among a group of nation-states. The objective of this paper is to establish and determine the theoretical basis and my ontological understanding of collective identity, before undertaking empirical research on collective identity formation among ASEAN nations.

## **Introduction**

The bulk of existing studies on East Asian integration focuses on material forces such as power and economic capabilities, and materialist approaches such as international political economy and neo-liberalism. Progress towards realizing an East Asian Community continues to be hampered by domestic problems of individual member states, as well as bilateral disagreements between states on a wide range of issues. Such concerns raise the question of whether there is a need for integration studies to expand or shift from dominant rationalist approaches. This need has resulted in the rise of constructivist approaches and interpretations in community building studies. Constructivism creates the necessary room for the identities and

interests of international actors to take a central place in theorizing international relations. Such identities and interests are central determinants in state behavior, and constructivists argue that such identities and interests are not objectively grounded in material forces (such as economic and political power) but the result of shared ideas (norms, culture and values) and the social construction of such ideas.

“Identity” has become the one of the popular buzzwords for scholars of social science and International Relations (IR). Integration studies have also embraced the concept of identity by studying the factors and process of “collective identity” construction. The formation of a collective identity is crucial, as it provides solidarity and continuity to the community building process, which the EAC project sorely needs. “Collective identification is an essential variable in integration theory, since without changes in identity the most we can expect is behavioral cooperation, not community”.<sup>1</sup>

This paper represents my first efforts at studying the conceptualization of collective identity in integration. Focusing on the Southeast Asian region, this study aims to provide empirical contribution by applying existing analytical frameworks on identity to the ASEAN example, and to provide theoretical contribution by testing the explanatory power and limitations of existing conceptual frameworks of collective identity. This paper, in essence, is an introduction on how to study identity in IR. In this paper, I present a general overview of literature on how identity is understood and treated in IR, and what are concepts and frameworks of identity available to IR scholars. From this collection, I seek to gauge whether such concepts are sufficient in explaining collective identity formation for integration between nation-states. Works on collective identity have largely developed within the context of nation-building, in other words, the formation of national identity. The units being “collected” are the different racial, social and cultural groups within the boundaries of a nation-state. I argue that for integration studies where nation-states are the units, we need to expand the concept of collective identity and adjust the analytical framework we use. With that in mind, I introduce and propagate a model to analyze collective identity construction – the “Border-Unity” model, which will complement and improve upon existing identity studies. Through this paper, I hope to establish and determine the theoretical basis and my ontological understanding of collective identity, before undertaking empirical research on collective identity formation among ASEAN nations.

On a broader context, my hope is for this paper and my subsequent study on collective identity formation in integration to contribute to my overarching research goal, which is to study and understand the relationship between ideational elements and material factors in IR. Though I hesitate to define strictly my theoretical IR approach at this early stage, my research intentions are similar to those of soft constructivists such as Alexander Wendt and Peter Katzenstein who

seek to find the middle ground between rationalist approaches (whether realist or liberal) and interpretive approaches (mainly postmodernist, poststructuralist and critical).<sup>2</sup> The main argument and hypothesis that I wish to research on is how ideas become rigid and reified, in other words, how ideas become “material”. This study on how collective identities become constructed and essentialized in actors’ minds would be a first step in understanding how ideas transform into material factors.

### **Identity Frameworks**

As we tackle the question of how to analyze and treat identity, and how to use identity as tool to study world politics, we are faced with the conceptual ambiguity and complexity of the term “identity”, as well as the plurality of definitions of and approaches to identity. Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue that identity has become too ambiguous and “too torn between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ meanings, essential connotations and constructivist qualifiers” to be useful for social analysis.<sup>3</sup> Brubaker and Cooper claim that “identity” has lost its analytical purchase due to the tension between constructivist language - that attempts to ‘soften’ the term “identity” and avoid “reification” by theorizing identities as constructed, fluid and multiple - and the essentialist argumentation, which requires a ‘hard’ definition for “identity” to be effective in practice.

Despite the ambiguity of the term “identity”, Brubaker and Cooper did acknowledge a few key uses, where the term “identity” is made to a great deal of work. It is used as a ground or basis of social or political action, highlighting and conceptualizing non-instrumental modes of action; to denote a fundamental and consequential sameness among members of a group or category, which may be understood objectively (as a sameness “in itself”) or subjectively (as an experienced, felt, or perceived sameness); to capture allegedly core, deep, foundational aspects of selfhood; to highlight the processual, interactive development of the kind of collective self-understanding, solidarity, or “groupness” that can make collective action possible; to highlight the unstable, multiple, fluctuating, and fragmented nature of the contemporary “self”. Brubaker and Cooper argue that such usages point in sharply differing directions. Despite certain affinities and compatibility between certain usages, there are strong tensions as well, such as certain uses highlighting fundamental sameness and some uses rejecting notions of abiding sameness. These contradictory connotations result in “identity” losing its analytical substance and meaning. Brubaker and Cooper suggest that the work and congested meanings above be divided and parceled out, and the single term “identity” be substituted with a number of alternative terms, such as “identification and categorization”, “self-understanding and social location”, and “commonality, connectedness and groupness”.

Despite agreeing with Brubaker and Cooper’s overall critique that much use of “identity”

may be plagued by ambiguity, Patricia M. Goff and Kevin C. Dunn remain unconvinced that discarding the term “identity” altogether and substituting them with other labels provides inherent advantages, and argued that such labels themselves run the risk of fragmenting and isolating mutually reinforcing and interrelated social processes.<sup>4</sup> Instead, they propose to unpack the term “identity” in order to grapple directly with the conceptual ambiguity, as well as the plurality of definitions and approaches, that may characterize usage of identity in IR studies.

Goff and Dunn identified four key features of identity in which to focus on – alterity, fluidity, constructedness, and multiplicity. Alterity refers to the relational nature of identity, where the “self” in identity is defined against an “other”. Thinking about alterity not only serves to define the “in-group” or the “out-group”, but also points to several questions, such as: for what purposes and under what circumstances are identities used for subordinating an “out-group”? Can we identify a set of circumstances under which identity might distinguish, but not subordinate? Fluidity refers to the dynamic and evolving nature of identity, rejecting the notion of identity as fixed, homogenous and bounded. This line of inquiry raises the need to ask why and under what circumstances some identities evolve more than or more quickly than others. Why do some retain a relative degree of continuity over time? Why is it that other identities have not altered noticeably? Constructedness refers to the declaration that identities are socially constructed. In this line of inquiry, we investigate which actors, practices, mechanisms, institutions, and so forth are implicated in the social construction of a given identity. Do these vary across identities? How is the construction of identity undertaken? How does one engage in an empirical investigation of the discursive construction of identities, determining which types and forms of discourses count and which ones do not? Multiplicity refers to the multiple nature of identity. Actors have multiple identities, and they shift back and forth between them. This begs the question – why do certain identities come to the fore in certain circumstances? Goff and Dunn suggest that by disaggregating identity into these four dimensions, we heighten the conceptual clarity and consistency, as well as intellectual rigor, of discussions on identity, and highlight the usefulness of identity as an analytical category. Goff and Dunn stress that we not erect boundaries between these four dimensions, but to use them together in a four-fold organizing framework as a heuristic device.

In describing the uses of identity, Brubaker and Cooper understood “identity” as often opposed to “interest” as a ground or basis of social or political action. Identity may be used to “underscore the manner in which action – individual or collective – may be governed by particularistic self-understandings rather than by putatively universal self-interest”. Wendt argues that “interests are dependent on identities and so are not competing causal mechanisms but distinct phenomena – in the one case, motivational, in the other, cognitive and structural-and, as such, play different roles in explaining action”.<sup>5</sup> Katzenstein outlined the lines of

argument in his edited book *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* by including both identity and interests in the causal pathways, suggesting that variations in state identities, or changes in state identity, affect national interests and subsequently policies of states, as well as state policies directly.<sup>6</sup> Katzenstein highlights the role of norms and culture as the grounds in which identity is constructed and constituted. Amitav Acharya described the relationship between norms and identity formation in the case of ASEAN community building, considering norm dynamics and the politics of regional identity formation as independent forces in promoting regional order and effective regionalism.<sup>7</sup>

In his more recent work, an edited book with Jeffrey Checkel on European identity<sup>8</sup>, Katzenstein argues that identities exist in the plural. These identities can be conceived as both social process and political project. Understood as process, identities flow through multiple networks and create new patterns of identification. Students of integration explore how feelings of community arose from the “bottom-up”, outside of or around regional institutions. Viewed as project, the construction of identity is the task of elites and entrepreneurs, operating regional institutions or various national settings. Students of integration focus on the politicization of identity and the effect political leaders and institutions have in crafting a sense of allegiance from the “top-down”. Exploring the intersections and interactions between the two top-down and bottom-up storylines can capture the reality of identity. In relation to the integration and community building process, collective identity can be analyzed as a passive element (how does identity form or change during the community building process), or as an active element (how does identity affect the community building process, when consciously used a political tool).

In *Social Theory of International Politics*, Wendt describes identity is at base a subjective or unit-level quality, rooted in an actor’s self-understanding.<sup>9</sup> However, he also contends that the meaning of those understandings will often depend on whether other actors represent an actor in the same way, and to that extent identity will also have an intersubjective or systemic quality. Two kinds of ideas can enter into identity, those held by the Self and those held by the Other. Identities are constituted by both internal and external structures. Wendt reflects the character of this internal-external relationship by dividing identity into four kinds – personal/corporate identity, type identity, role identity, and collective identity. Personal/corporate identities are constituted by the material base and “self-organizing, homeostatic structures that make actors distinct entities”. An actor can have only one such identity. If a constitutive process is self-organizing, then there is no particular Other to which the Self is related. In contrast, type identities, role identities and collective identities involve Others in the constitution of Self. Identity formation is dependent on culture and social context, and the relationship between Self And Other. When reaching collective identity, the Self-Other distinction becomes blurred, meaning the Self is “categorized as Other. Collective identity has

the causal power to induce actors to define the welfare of the Other as part of that of the Self, to calculate their interests as a group or a team. The relevance and utility of this particular categorization of identity is not immediately clear. Admitting that his definitions are a first cut and not definitive, Wendt developed these definitions mainly to counter the realist argument that states could never form collective identities, and that states are by nature fundamentally self-interested, ignoring the welfare of the Other. When faced with conflicts among multiple identities, it is not entirely clear how the hierarchy of identity commitments is determined or formed.

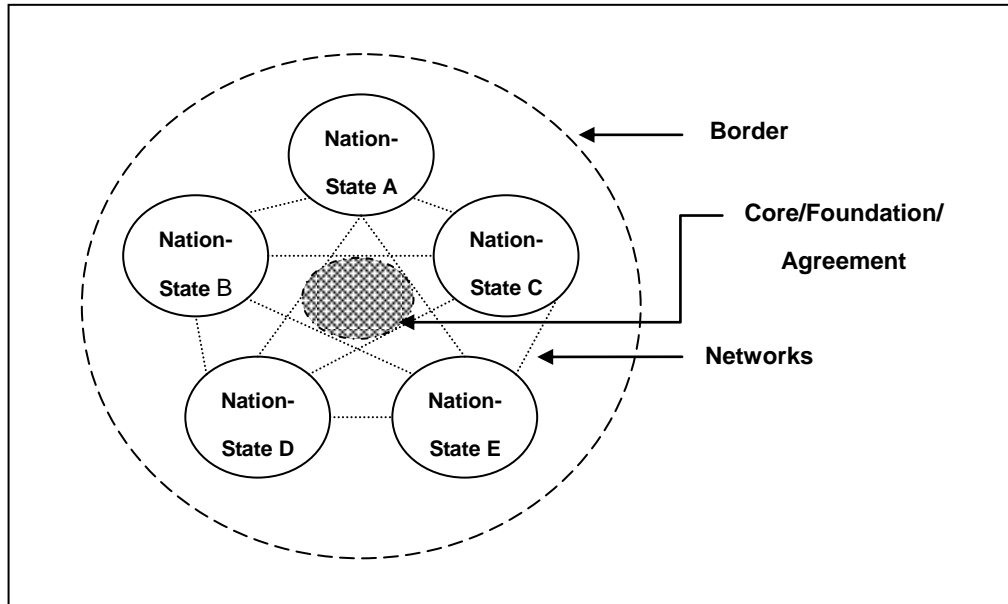
While conceptions of collective identity have much room to grow and be defined, national identity has been conceptualized and deliberated extensively in a wide range of rich literature. In his book *The Identity of Nations*, Monserrat Guibernau described national identity as having five dimensions – psychological, cultural, territorial, historical and political.<sup>10</sup> Each dimension can be explored by analyzing the level of collective sharing and awareness of the key components in each dimension (psychological dimension – shared consciousness; cultural dimension – shared values, beliefs, habits, conventions, customs, and practices; territorial dimension – shared areas and boundaries; historical dimensions – shared history and experience; political dimension – shared political equity, membership, participation and allegiance). Guibernau then applied those same dimensions to analyze European identity, American identity and cosmopolitan identity, and gained much insight. However, Guibernau analyzed these identities in comparison with national identity, presuming regional or international structure is the same as the domestic structure of a nation-state. Such presumption may not be true. Thus, the desired destination for the identity-building process may be different.

Another common model in which to study collective identity is symbolic identity. The prominence, proliferation and institutionalization of symbols representing the group are examined to mark the identity-building process and determine the strength of collective identity. In the case of ASEAN, Suryadinata divided regional identity into symbolic/institutional and value identities, describing the former as concrete and the latter as abstract.<sup>11</sup> At the moment, there exists an ASEAN regional symbol and an institution – the ASEAN logo and ASEAN Secretariat. Suryadinata suggested four other “symbols” of ASEAN regionalism which should be promoted – establishment of an ASEAN studies centre, establishment of an ASEAN College/University, common celebration of ASEAN’S birthday (to be called ASEAN Day), and changing the name of the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) to ASEAN Games – to enhance people’s awareness of the presence of ASEAN. Value identities are based on common values and norms.

## Border-Unity Model

The concepts and frameworks of identity outlined in the previous section have largely been developed within the context of nation-building, in other words, the formation of national identity. The units being “collected” are the different racial, social and cultural groups within the boundaries of a nation-state. The concept for collective identity for a nation-state can be used and duplicated to analyze collective identity for a group of nations, a community, or a region. In this section, I explore the possibility of expanding the concept of collective identity and adjusting the analytical framework, specifically for integration studies where nation-states are the units.

I started from a simple schema of the different representations of integration, as shown in Figure 1 below. Integration can be described as having three essential parts. Firstly, the “border” defines the members within the group and non-members outside of the community. Secondly, the integrated “networks” between nation-state members of the group, defined by the freedom of flow of information and resources between the members. Thirdly, the “core” which represents the foundation and basis in which the group exists, and how the border and networks are defined (or allowed to be defined). This may be represented by a material agreement or charter, or unwritten set of rules and norms.

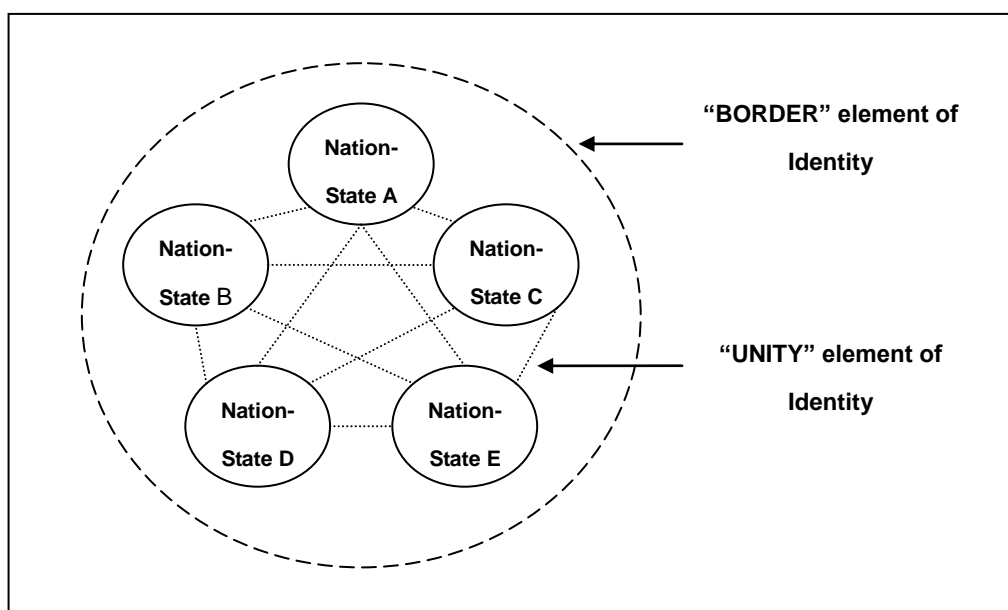


**Figure 1: Different representations of integration**

Mimicking the schema above for integration, I introduce a model to analyze collective identity construction – the “Border-Unity” model. The schema of the model is shown in Figure 2 below. The “Border” element refers to parts of collective identity (project and process) which

delineate between members and non-members of the group. The “Unity” element refers to parts of collective identity (project and process) which promote unity, collective togetherness and shared awareness/consciousness. The “Border” element emphasizes differences between members and non-members, while the “Unity” element emphasizes sameness or togetherness among members. The “strength” of identity is then evaluated separately through these two elements/parts.

Comparing the schema for this “Border-Unity” model with the earlier schema for integration, one notices the absence of a “Core” element in the “Border-Unity” model. The reason for this absence is to highlight and emphasize the separate functions of respective “Border” and “Unity” elements. In the earlier integration schema, a particular policy, norm, institution or legal instrument (charter/agreement) may be seen as a significant and independent part of integration, a “core” as we call it. However, in the context of identity, a particular policy, norm, institution or legal instrument (charter/agreement) is only significant in this model in so far as how it affects “Border” element and “Unity” element. To illustrate this, we will take the example of the non-interference norm in ASEAN and the case of Myanmar. The non-interference norm strengthens the “Border” element, as it distinguishes between the strong respect for sovereignty agreed upon by ASEAN members and the engagement policy being pushed by outside powers on ASEAN members to act upon Myanmar. However, it weakens the “Unity” element as certain member countries may not feel increasingly disconnected to Myanmar as they are not able to engage directly to correct Myanmar if they disagree, due to the non-interference norm.



**Figure 2: “Border-Unity” Model of Collective Identity**

The implications and the objectives of this model are:

- (i) It provides a framework focused on analyzing collective identity formation for/during integration.
- (ii) While it presumes some reification and essentialization of identity, it does not ignore nor prevent the use of constructivist concepts, such as the four dimensions of identity proposed by Goff and Dunn. Alterity, Fluidity, Constructedness and Multiplicity can all be examined from each of the two elements, “Border” and “Unity”
- (iii) It brings national identities into the collective identity “picture”/framework, rather than look at how identities for the community form separately. The model does not presume that the national identities “converge”, but looks at how the national identities can be “united” and “tied” together.
- (iv) It can be used to analyze both identity as a project (top-down approach) and identity as a process (bottom-up approach).
- (v) By emphasizing the two separate elements of identity, this model gives a better understanding on how certain policies that were intended and supposed to strengthen identity can also weaken identity.

This model is by no means intended to replace other models or frameworks of collective identity. It is intended to complement current frameworks and be used as an analytical tool to organize sources, discourse and information, and meet the objectives outlined above. There is room to refine and improve this “Border-Unity” model, and I hope that it can complement and improve upon existing identity studies.

## **Conclusion**

The next step for this study is to apply the various analytical frameworks in identity outlined in this paper on the ASEAN example. This will provide two main contributions. The first main contribution is providing empirical data on the construction and formation of collective identity for the Southeast Asian region. By and large, the identity concepts and frameworks mentioned in this paper have been applied to national examples i.e. collective identity formation within one nation-state, and the EU example i.e. construction of the European identity. There is a lack of empirical research on the collective identity formation for the whole Southeast Asian region, and the group of ASEAN nations. The second main contribution is providing further empirical basis to evaluate the effectiveness of each identity concept and framework mentioned in this paper, including the “Border-Unity” model, and to determine how further can such identity concepts be improved and expanded.

On a final note, this study hopes to place itself in-between proponents and opponents of

community building. I described the “Border-Unity” model as a framework to analyze collective identity in *integration* and any *group* of nation-states. I adopted a flexible definition of integration which includes regional communities, whether existing (European Union), work-in-progress (ASEAN) or planned (East Asian Community), as well as any international organization or recognized group of nation-states, such as regional organizations (e.g. Arab League), trade blocs (e.g. WTO), commodity cartels (e.g. OPEC) and military alliances (e.g. NATO).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Wendt, Alexander. “Collective Identity Formation and the International State” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (June 1994), pp. 384-396.

<sup>2</sup> Adler, Emanuel. “Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics” *European Journal of International Relations*, Volume Vol. 3, No. 3 (1997), pp. 319-363.

<sup>3</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper. “Beyond “Identity”” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (February 2000), pp. 1-47.

<sup>4</sup> Goff, Patricia M., and Kevin C. Dunn, eds. *Identity and Global Politics: Theoretical and Empirical Elaborations*. New York and Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Wendt, Alexander. “Collective Identity Formation and the International State” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (June 1994), pp. 384-396.

<sup>6</sup> Katzenstein, Peter J. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Acharya, Amitav. “Do Norms and Identity Matter? Community and Power in Southeast Asia’s Regional Order” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (March 2005), pp. 95-118.

<sup>8</sup> Checkel, Jeffrey T., and Peter J. Katzenstein, eds. *European Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Giubernau, Montserrat. *The Identity of Nations*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Suryadinata, Leo. “Towards an ASEAN Charter: Promoting an ASEAN Regional Identity” In *Framing the ASEAN Charter: An ISEAS Perspective*, ed. Rodolfo C. Severino. Singapore: ISEAS, 2005.