

## Book review

### **Identity and Control, H. White., 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2008)**

Since the first edition of Harrison White's major theoretical work, *Identity and Control (I&C)* in 1992, there has been an explosion of interest in social network analysis. It is exciting that a second edition of the book has arrived. In this new edition, White lays the groundwork for his current research on language, introducing his idea that "meaning" is triggered by switching among the countless networks in which we are enmeshed. In addition, White has added a chapter on networks, and he has taken care to provide examples of some of his ideas, making them more accessible.

The original *I&C* was a difficult book; some found it to be impenetrable. When two interviewers asked White about the difficulty of reading it, he replied, "sociology is a hard field" [MacLean and Olds, 2001](#) (p. 6). White's wry comment is valid. Sociology *is* a difficult subject, and White explores territory where pat answers are not to be had. Social life is "messy", he insists. "[T]here is no tidy atom and no clear-cut world, only complex striations, long strings that repeat as in a polymer goo". Although, there are no neat systems and subsystems, the strings do repeat and there is discoverable order at different scales.

Reviewers have likened the first edition of *I&C* to *Finnegan's Wake* or the poetry of William Blake. Although looking at it as poetry deprecates the strong empirical component, it is not completely unfair. As University of Michigan professor Wayne Baker once said in an email to me, "Harrison's work can rearrange one's thinking".

White asserts:

The network analyses [in *I&C*] . . . all rest on [the] stipulation that network, tie, and story can indeed portray what's going on, that they are adequate to capture essential aspects of the lived social experience. . . That claim originally rested on little evidence, it was bold and provocative, but two generations of research now offer a menu of results to be sampled.<sup>1</sup>

White's writing and influence has been wide ranging. In *I&C*, he draws especially on a group of iconoclastic students he attracted at Harvard in the mid-1960s and 1970s, who worked with him in what some have called the "Harvard Revolution" in social networks. I can only briefly summarize the former students' work here. Peter [Bearman's \(2005\)](#) book is on doormen in Manhattan. Scott Boorman, whose work has focused on blockmodels, encouraged this new edition. Ron [Breiger's \(1974\)](#) paper on duality of person's and groups is a classic. [Carley's \(2006\)](#) work ranges from cognition [Carley \(2006\)](#) to computer modeling [Carley \(2000\)](#). Ivan Chase's studies of how pecking orders form in vertebrates (birds and fish) has shown that pairwise dominance – the top animal rising to the top because he or she beats up all the others – cannot be the way hierarchies form

---

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from the second edition of *Identity and Control*, which does not yet have its final page numbers.

Chase (2006), Chase (1982). Bonnie Erickson pioneered the linkage of networks, attitudes and culture Erickson (1988), Granovetter's (1973) "strength of weak ties" paper (1973) has become influential far beyond sociology. Michael Schwartz has shown the importance of randomness in vacancy chains; he first proposed the stochastic models that became the core of White's (1970) *Chains of Opportunity* book (1970). White notes that "Barry Wellman stands out as having devoted an entire career to exploring and documenting natural social worlds" in his theorizing Wellman (1988) and his studies of networks as non-local communities Wellman (2001).

In the new second edition of *I&C*, White develops a description of social life that allows for both regularity and randomness. To do so, he invents new terms or uses old terms in new ways. The theory is not always built with successively larger scale objects, like a house out of bricks. Rather, the elements are recursive, like language where a sentence can be part of a noun phrase and a noun phrase a part of a sentence.

The closest to primitives are: *identity* and *control*. A premise of the theory is that social "things", "people", "groups", "organizations", and so on want to get their way in the world. Rather than call them "things" or even "people", White talks of identities. Control is not just a matter of dominance, though it could be, but it is also control at a Goffmanesque level of controlling the frame or the presentation of self: "getting social footing".

### 1. Four senses of identity

In the first edition of *I&C*, White had used the term "identity" in multiple ways. In the second edition, he makes this multiple usage explicit, discussing four senses of identity.

1. Imagine coming into a new situation where you are unknown, such as starting a new job, attending a new school, or attending a conference. You need to establish an "[i]dentity [that] achieves social footing as source and destination of communications to which identities attribute meaning". You might strive to be seen as witty, friendly, helpful or any number of things that must be established by your interactions.
2. For a time, a group you are in might settle down with "one as topic selector, another as clown, etc.—and may celebrate themselves by story or other work". This second sense of identity is that of a role. There are also roles in the global sense: mother, doctor, etc.
3. The third sense is when you carry the identity you achieve in one setting into another setting. There is a mismatch between what is appropriate for one role and the other.

This may occur, for example, when a kind of food newly enjoyed at school with peers is rejected when the child goes home. Or it may occur when the clothes that classmates insist upon, as their badge of belonging, are disdained at home and purchase resisted.

A role in one group carried over into another might well be a mismatch. A college professor who gives detailed references in student lectures might be considered to be droning on in a business discussion. Those with whom we are interacting have their control projects (agendas) so the process will not be seamless. Misunderstandings, accidental or otherwise, random interruptions, changes in group membership, and so many more things foil control projects.

4. The fourth sense of identity is "what is usually meant by identity in ordinary talk": identity constructed by stories after the fact, such as the identity of Harrison White constructed in an article like this.

In discussing these four senses of identities, White takes the view that identities are from the interaction of relations, and he carefully avoids language that assigns attributes to identities. An identity (who might be a person) might be honest, trustworthy, duplicitous, or any such thing. Yet, honesty, etc. are not part of a person like eye color or height but have to do with the social environment.

Identities are the “nodes” of White’s networks, but he cautions:

[The term] “[n]etwork” is retained as designation because of its familiarity, but it does have misleading overtones of nodes being monads and of ties as lines or arrows in physical space with Cartesian dimensionality.

White’s networks emphasize the relationship between networks and experience. “Networks are phenomenological realities as well as measurement constructs”. The member of a group that becomes the clown in the context of that group “is” the clown. No one can be a clown without an audience, and the role must be relative to others: “being a clown” is not an individual attribute. The identity of “clown” is created and reproduced by the situation. This leads to the question: what are the interactions between the clown and others? To fall back on the lines and dots metaphor, network metrics have found many special things about certain positions in networks such as centrality, equivalence, and constraint. The power of an executive secretary to the CEO is largely because of his or her role as gatekeeper. This is another example of how identity is situational. But knowing that identities are relational still leaves us with the question: “how do we talk about these relations?” Part of *I&C* is answering that question.

In the case of the executive secretary, power comes from simple communications relationships, like the valve in a water system that regulates the flow. What White is talking about is more subtle. Stories are an essential element in his theory, and they are related to ties because “a tie is anything about which you can tell a story”.

In one view, a story is a catalogue of possible relations that can be modeled using network analysis. Stories can be told about anything in our experience. Saying that “Mary screamed at Sue because she was mad at her boyfriend, she really did not mean it”, provides a wealth of information about relationships between Mary, Sue and Mary’s boyfriend. People who know the three can make sense of the ties and observe the control effort implicit in the qualification of Mary’s screaming. There is an attempt to have “Mary is not really mad at Sue” supersede the more obvious interpretation of the screaming. As White says:

Stories do not cause social action, nor need they guide it. Rather, they account for it in much the way a Certified Public Accountant accounts [for] the doings of a firm. Stories come as sets. Each story-set can account for a wide array of possible events, after the fact, in some range of social and ecological settings, to sustain a discipline or a tie.

There is nothing weird about being weird, it’s normal. So our accustomed stories are just too tame to singly match reality, even of the everyday. Each “normal” story defining some “normal” path is itself a one-dimensional abstract not matching any real life segment. It takes a whole set of stories to incorporate a segment of real life. It would take an abnormal, a weird story to, by itself, describe a normal patch of an identity’s existence. So our lives are all weird; it is the stories that are “normal”.

Sets of stories are eminently practical tools, rather than mere decoration. They are tools analogous to gears in mechanical machinery. That is, stories are ways to bridge between different scales. For example, by personifying a giant state or bureaucracy, an actor is enabled

to conceive and maintain ties to such. Differences in scale make it all the more inevitable that stories come in a set able to accommodate to a given value whatever happens.

We either make up the stories ourselves or learn them from personal contact and other sources such as the Internet, news media, and books. These stories are active in different circumstances. For instance, a software engineer can spend all day talking about unit tests, user experience, and related subjects. It would be in the form of stories such as “Jane used it in such and such a way and this happened”. Some stories are about events that rapidly fade, but a set of stories accumulate that are called on in various combinations when talking about activities. That software engineer can go home and have dinner with his family, and the stories will be about achievement in school, problems with the house, the allocation of chores, and others in a long list. There could be little overlap, and yet, each set of ties and identities would be different.

This is something that might be reflected in communication patterns, with the software engineer, for example, being a bridge between social worlds. But *I&C* goes a step further and allows for multiple ties that spin out into accounts of competitors, successful projects, workmates, other students (and their families), etc.

## 2. Disciplines

If stories are accounts, they must account for something that has already taken place. We often engage in joint activities: sometimes with people we do not really know or with familiar people in unfamiliar ways. We buy things in stores, play sports, or silently elect a leader for projects such as finding a restaurant or selecting a new car. We work with people with whom we may have nothing in common besides our commitment to creating whatever it is we create. We act to protect ourselves from threats to our identities or well being, excluding and accepting others as a joint activity. White calls this type of joint activity a *discipline*.

White uses a meaning of “discipline” close to “she plays the piano well because she is *disciplined*”. Yet it is not self discipline, but group discipline. The name suggests its active nature: White’s disciplines are ongoing social activities that are embedded in networks, but they are not networks themselves. They are like little eddies and whirlpools in a stream that are made of the surrounding water but may be recognizably distinct.

Although some explicit and detailed models have been proposed, accounts of disciplines perhaps serve best as heuristic guides to observation (including that folded in among participants’ own discourse). Flexibility enhances scope of use. . . Neat and precise discriminations are at odds with the stochastic messiness of social life.

Disciplines can have an important place in the creation of identities. Disciplines, while disciplining activity into one of the three forms, also rank the identities with respect to each other. White calls this a “valuation ordering”. How the identities are valued differs with each discipline.

For it to be possible to compare two things, it has to make sense: they have to be comparable. We do not compare eating dinner to a guitar or musical ability to trees. It is somewhat ironic that for one person (or company) to be deemed better than another, and thus different, they have to be the same in many respects. The basis of comparison tells us something about the identities that are being compared and, in fact, can be part of the creation of an identity. Thus, there are really two main parts to a discipline: the activity and the method by which the identities are compared.

Disciplines are an important part of social structures embedded in larger contexts. Disciplines can form ties with other identities and other disciplines, thereby decoupling the ongoing process

Table 1  
Three disciplines

Discipline	Interface	Arena	Council
Comparisons	Quality	Purity	Status
Activities	Commitment	Selection	Media

of identities from the context in which they are embedded. For example, wheel manufacturing became an industry of its own that is partially decoupled from the auto industry, a child decouples home and goes to university, or a firm outsources its payroll to decouple it from the firm.

Disciplines need not be distinct: an activity may have elements of more than one discipline. *I&C* describes activities of getting things done that goes on all around us. It is worthwhile spending time in *I&C* with White's examples and learning to notice disciplines, as White has done from his own experience and from the many case studies he has read and assimilated.

### 3. Three disciplines

White identifies three disciplines: *interface*, *arena*, and *council*. Interfaces make comparisons based on *quality*, arenas on *purity*, and councils on *status*. Their activities are *commitment*, *selection*, and *mediation* (Table 1).

### 4. Interfaces

The prototypical discipline is the interface discipline which makes comparisons by *quality* and whose activity is to *commit* to a course of action. Flows of material *production* pass through interfaces, anything from making toasters to giving haircuts.

White gives the example of barbers in Manhattan. The commitment is that hair stays cut. We can compare barbers by the quality of their haircuts relative to other barbers. Some barbers key off of other barbers more than off of their clients. Each barber is close to being structurally equivalent because each buys hair supplies from the same companies and has the same potential customers. White talks of this as a stream with suppliers being upstream and customers downstream. Shampoo manufacturers are structurally equivalent because they have ties downstream to the same pools of barbers and retail outlets, and they buy nearly identical ingredients upstream from the same manufacturers. This applies to most production: toasters, haircuts, cars, movies, etc.

### 5. Arena

*Arena* disciplines are actively concerned with *selection* on the basis of *purity*. White talks of "matching" as part of the arena. eBay and the stock market clearly are arenas. White gives the example of a "swap meet" where people match items with those of others. They are selecting items by matching them. White gives the example of American university fraternities that filter who to date (and marry) by their ties to other acceptable fraternities or sororities. There are any number of analogous selections, religious beliefs, food choices (carnivores need not apply), professions, etc. Still another example is a doctor selecting a disease by matching it to symptoms.

Arenas are what White calls "exchange markets" in contrast to the "production markets" of interfaces. For example, a "production market" interface may operate from the point of view of a supplier somewhere in the flow of manufacturing. They are committed to a certain volume at

certain times, rather than just taking their product in hand and seeing what they can get for it. By contrast, this may not be true from the point of view of “exchange market” consumers who have certain resources which they match to a selected product. This example brings up a point, which is that disciplines are not static entities with distinct boundaries, and they incorporate the point-of-view of the identities involved. The metaphor of eddies and whirlpools is apt.

## 6. Council

The *council* discipline is the activity of *mediation* with valuation by *status* or prestige.<sup>2</sup> Suppose a group of people are trying to achieve something in the social sphere such as adopting new management practices in an organization, or anything that will require mobilization or mediation. There will be jockeying for control within the group, usually around different issues. For each group member, the perceptions others have of them will confer more or less prestige. It may be that people with the right ties will be perceived as having more prestige. But a person’s prestige is more about the shared perception of ties and ability to mediate or mobilize than it is about reality. Since the identities in the discipline will each have their own control projects, there will be jockeying for position.

## 7. Style

There is more to *I&C* than the analysis of disciplines. What White calls a *style* “may supply particular idiom[s] for the valuation orderings in disciplines” within and across levels of networks. Styles are a “generalization of network” which “presupposes and specifies some complex layering of networks within and across levels”. Nodes (persons, etc.) are structurally different in each network. For instance, someone may be central in a friendship network, but not in an advice network. Or her role as seen from within the organization may be different from what is seen from the outside. Yet for mismatches to take place, something must be carried from one network to the next. One way of thinking about this would be to think of attributes of the node. But suppose the mismatches are about things like taste in food or dress. These are not personal attributes, but neither are they directly attributable to a tie in the simple sense of interpersonal information flows. In other words, an individual may not learn that a style of dress is sexy from interpersonal ties but may learn this by observing people in the street, on media, watching people react to others and so on.

Styles are similar to Bourdieu’s (1990) *habitus*: “a system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment... as well as being the organizing principles of action” (p. 13). Style is persistent and a “change in style is difficult because style is coordinated to [the] stratification system. A style has settled in only through continued reenactments. No change in style can take place without change in [the] organization of networks”. Although White’s styles are not dispositions, as are Bourdieu’s *habitus*, they are similar in that they are part of what gives the things around them meaning. In White’s usage, styles manifest themselves at both a macro and micro level: they can be “observed across . . . army, church, colonialism”.

For example, people often say, “I talked to tech support”. Although they must have been talking to an individual, the individual is largely irrelevant. If we look at the idea of style as organizing

<sup>2</sup> In the first edition and sometimes in the second, White calls the activity of the discipline: “mobilization”.

perception and action, we can see that it could apply to both organizations and individuals. White points out that “in most present social science ‘person’ is instead taken as the unquestioned atom”. But in the light of the realization that persons are social constructions and social relations inform those constructions, the “atom” idea does not make sense. “Persons come into existence and are formed as overlaps among identities from distinct network-populations”. Persons are styles. If we talk to a “person”, who are we talking to: to their ears, their mind, or their lips? “You the reader are a social construction in a practical and current sense, as much as are communities”.

## 8. Institutions, rhetorics, regimes and realms

Although White says that “networks, tie and story can . . . capture essential aspects of the lived social experience”, he also introduces new terms to discuss broad social experiences. His key concepts are *institutions*, *rhetorics*, *regimes*, and *realms*.

Institutions are social conventions that we follow. They are sustained by rhetorics: the stories that are invoked as accounts of activities. Rhetorics are “common sense”, i.e., a sense held in common by many that allows them to act together. For example, “having an appointment is an institution . . . sustained by [the] rhetoric of promptness”. Yet, a person is part of multiple networks and would have to carry that sense across networks for “having an appointment” to have significance. Hence, an appointment for a job might entail stories about responsibility and an appointment with a friend might entail stories of empathy and respect.

Regimes are larger-scale formations that shape parts of society. Like styles, they guide our perception. An example of a regime is a foundation with a certain goal, such as giving to the homeless. A realm is its area of influence. White is not talking about the categories or subcategories of an observer, because for this realm to “exist” it has to be created and sustained by both observers and participants. His discussion of how this works calls into play networks, disciplines, styles, institutions and rhetorics.

## 9. Concluding thoughts

After describing much of social life as ways to block action, White has one chapter on how to get action. He makes suggestions based on the way he sees our social world organized as he has defined it in the previous chapters. The ideas are refreshing and sometimes amusing, and are well worth the reading to understand them.

Yet, White cautions that “despite all our vaunted social science we could not predict next week’s social climate in some second grade classroom”! (Neither can we predict the weather.) *I&C* goes straight for the illusion of regularities. It shows in many ways how we fool ourselves into viewing a world as dispositional and ordered when it is really situational and random.

The book goes beyond a merely deconstructionist approach. It not only makes suggestions about things we can look for to find the scraps of regularity, but it also shows how patterns lock us up in various ways. The conclusion of *I&C* is not that we cannot act and make changes, it is that we need to be aware of how we are fooled into thinking we are doing one thing when we are actually doing another.

*I&C* is a difficult book, but not everything worthwhile is easy. Multiple readings are required, but the benefits are great: “Every person is a god, since a god is exactly any actor required and generated as [the] intersection of multiple social worlds”.

## Acknowledgements

I thank Mark Granovetter, who encouraged me to read *I&C* in the first place. He not only put up with my questions, but always pointed me in directions that helped me really understand; Harrison White for making available drafts of the second edition of *I&C*, answering questions and encouraging my curiosity; Harald Katzmaier and his colleagues at FAS. Research for being a sounding board; the Stanford University Sociology Department and Woody Powell and SCANCOR for inspiration and research access; Sean Everton for his review and comments; and Barry and Beverly Wellman for their editorial help through multiple drafts. Special thanks to my wife, Kabita, for support and encouragement in all I do.

## References

- Bearman, P., 2005. *Doormen*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Bourdieu, P., 1990. In *Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Breiger, R., 1974. The duality of persons and groups. *Social Forces* 53, 181–190.
- Carley, K.M., 2000. In: Gass, S.I., Harris, C.M. (Eds.), *Computational Analysis of Social and Organizational Systems*. Encyclopaedia of Operations Research and Management Science. Kluwer Academic Publishers, Norwell, MA, pp. 126–131.
- Carley, K.M., 2006. In: Howard, J.A., Callero, P.L. (Eds.), *Growing Up: The development and acquisition of social knowledge. The Self-Society Dynamic: Cognition, Emotion and Action*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Chase, I., 2006. Music notation: a new method for visualizing social interaction in animals and humans. *Frontiers in Zoology* 3, 18.
- Chase, I.D., 1982. Dynamics of hierarchy formation: the sequential development of dominance relationships. *Behavior* 80, 218–240.
- Erickson, B., 1988. The relational basis of attitudes. In: Wellman, B., Berkowitz, S.D. (Eds.), *Social Structures: A Network Approach*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 99–122.
- Granovetter, M., 1973. The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology* 78, 1360–1380.
- MacLean, A., Olds, A. 2001. Interview with Harrison White. June 16. <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/theory@madison/papers/ivwWhite.pdf>.
- Wellman, B., 1988. Structural analysis: from method and metaphor to theory and substance. In: Wellman, B., Berkowitz, S.D. (Eds.), *Social Structures: A Network Approach*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 19–61.
- Wellman, B., 2001. Physical place and cyber-place: changing portals and the rise of networked individualism. *Int. J. Urban Regional Res.* 25 (2), 227–252.
- White, H.C., 1970. *Chains of Opportunity: System Models of Mobility in Organizations*. Harvard University Press, Boston.

Don Steiny\*

131 Felix Street #15, CA 95060, United States

\*Tel.: +1 831 471 1671.

E-mail address: [steiny@infopoint.com](mailto:steiny@infopoint.com)