

How Existential Funds of Identity Can Enrich the Funds of Identity Concept

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Abstract

This paper responds to recent developments in the Funds of Identity literature which has seen the introduction of two interconnected terms, *dark funds of identity* (Charteris, Thomas & Masters, 2018) and *existential funds of identity* (Poole & Huang, 2018). While these two concepts show a great deal of promise, neither has yet to be adequately theorised. For example, it is not clear whether they should be understood as an additional category of funds of identity to go with the five developed by Esteban-Guitart (2012) or whether they relate to all of the existing five categories as a modality of experience that brings into focus the positive and the negative. This paper addresses this issue by offering a more robust theoretical articulation of existential funds of identity and its relationship to the Funds of Identity concept. Rather than proposing a break with the existing literature, this paper argues that existential funds of identity should be accommodated within the Funds of Identity concept as presented by Esteban-Guitart (2012).

Keywords: Funds of identity; negative experiences; perezhivanie; existential funds of identity

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Introduction

Two terms have recently been suggested which could advance the Funds of Identity concept. The first is *existential funds of identity* (Poole, 2017b; Poole & Huang, 2018), which is defined as the positive and negative experiences that adolescent learners develop and appropriate in order to define themselves and to grow as human beings, and the second is *dark funds of identity* (Charteris, Thomas & Masters, 2018), defined as the ‘difficult’ experiences that individuals bring with them to make sense of theoretical concepts in the classroom.

However, neither of these approaches has yet to be adequately theorised. This conceptual paper functions as an apologetics of sorts, offering a more theoretical articulation of existential funds of identity and its relationship to the concept of Funds of Identity. Rather than proposing a break with the existing Funds of Identity literature, the aim of this paper is to show how the notion of existential funds of identity can, and should, be accommodated within the current framework developed by Esteban-Guitart (2012, 2016). I first provide a brief over-view of Funds of Identity in order to define the concept and to show how it has focused exclusively on positive experiences and emotions. I next explore the concept of *perezhivanie*, which has informed the theorisation of the concept of Funds of Identity, and has been greatly influential in my own work. I then explain how existential/dark funds of identity fits into the Funds of Identity concept, arguing that the former should be understood as an underlying modality of experience that allows the researcher to focus on the positive and negative experiences that occur within geographical, practical, cultural, social and institutional funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2016). This conceptualisation enriches the Funds of Identity approach by showing how both positive and negative funds of identity can be beneficial for psychological and pedagogical purposes.

Background

Funds of Identity

The concept of Funds of Identity is based on the premise that ‘people have and accumulate not only their household’s funds of knowledge but also life experiences that ultimately help them to define themselves’ (Subero, Vujasinović & Esteban-Guitart, 2017). Thus, one of the strengths of the Funds of Identity concept is the way that it recognises that individuals possess bodies of knowledge used for identity creation that can be in continuity or discontinuity with adult household knowledge (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a). This is because, from a Vygotskian perspective, human development is not the process of progressive socialisation as some might expect, but rather the process of progressive individuation (Moll, 2014). Internalised experiences are mobilised by students to mediate human identity and can be embodied and distributed in people, objects and artefacts (Esteban-Guitart & Moll 2014a). In addition, students’ experiences can be mobilised by teachers for pedagogical and social justice purposes (Esteban-Guitart, 2016).

Researchers working with a Funds of Identity approach tend to employ a multimodal or multimethodological approach to identifying and uncovering students’ funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2012), which includes combining more traditional qualitative data, such as interviews (Charteris et al., 2018) and written reflections

(Poole & Huang, 2018) with visual methods, such as self-portraits (Saubich & Esteban-Guitart, 2011; Jovés, Siqués, & Esteban-Guitart, 2015), avatars (Díaz Barriga, López, Vázquez, 2018; Poole, 2017b) and word clouds (Poole, 2017b). The aim of data collection is to capture the *historicity* of individuals' funds of identity (Hviid & Villadsen, 2014) – that is, to ensure that the collected funds of identity do not simply give a snap-shot of an individual's inner world, but rather show funds of identity as *synchronous* (temporal) and *diachronous* (contextual) in nature.

The role of positive and negative experiences and emotions

Funds of Identity has proven to be an effective approach that can help teachers to affirm marginalised learners' personal, familial and cultural identities in the mainstream classroom. However, the role that negative experiences and emotions might play in affirming learner identities remains under-researched. While Llopart & Esteban-Guitart (2016) have cautioned against using negative emotions and experiences in social justice work, due to the belief that doing so may perpetuate deficit discourses, there is nevertheless growing recognition that both positive and negative emotions and experiences have a part to play in psychological (e.g., Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014; McDonald & O'Callaghan, 2008; Miller, 2008) and pedagogical (e.g., Raino & Marjanovic-Shane, 2013; Reed, 2011; Zipin, 2009) development. Zipin (2009), for instance, has proposed the term *dark funds of knowledge* in order to problematise the tendency within Funds of Knowledge approaches to exclusively build curriculum units around positive experiences, which may lead to significant lifeworld experiences being ignored (Charteris et al., 2018). Becker (2014) has also proposed the term *funds of (difficult) knowledge* in order to 'account for the emotionally difficult chapters of one's cultural heritage or migration story' (p. 19).

More recently, Zipin's notion of dark funds of knowledge has found its way into the Funds of Identity literature, and has inspired two related concepts: dark funds of identity and existential funds of identity. Charteris et al.'s (2018) investigation into pre-service teachers' funds of identity found that teachers drew upon difficult experiences of schooling in order to make sense of the more abstract concepts taught within university units. The authors label these difficult experiences dark funds of identity, which, despite their seemingly negative connotation, can in fact assist inexperienced teachers in the construction and development of preservice teacher identities. Similarly, Poole (2017b) and Poole and Huang (2018) have proposed the notion of existential funds of identity – that is, the positive and negative experiences that adolescent learners develop and appropriate in order to define themselves and to grow as human beings. These experiences can be problematic circumstances, such as being suspended from school, exam pressure or falling out with a friend, as well as more personal issues to do with identity and belonging, such as feeling out of place.

While dark funds of identity and existential funds of identity could be taken as synonymous – they both seek to draw upon difficult experiences in order to effect positive pedagogical outcomes - they are in fact subtly different. The notion of dark funds of identity appears to represent a general form of funds of identity, whereas existential funds of identity could be described as a category or type of dark funds of identity. Polarising experiences into either light or dark, however, is problematic as it neglects the complex ways in which individuals internalise and make sense of their

experiences (Adams & Flear, 2015). Therefore, concepts are needed that are able to facilitate the whole spectrum of human experience and emotion, rather than parsing them into ‘light’ or ‘dark’. The notion of existential funds of identity has been presented as a way of synthesising both positive and negative experiences and emotions, but thus far has only been superficially defined.

The rest of this paper will present existential funds of identity in finer detail in order to clarify its relationship to the Funds of Identity approach as established by Esteban-Guitart. The next section explores how the Funds of Identity literature has drawn upon the concept of *perezhivanie* as a theoretical foundation for understanding funds of identity and the relationship between the individual and their environment.

Perezhivanie and Funds of Identity

The Vygotskian notion of *perezhivanie* has been drawn on by researchers in order to conceptualise Funds of Identity. Nogueira (2014) translates *perezhivanie* as *emotional experience*, which is taken to refer to ‘a unit in a constant dialectic relationship between the representation of the outside world and how the world is experienced by the person’ (p. 52). This unit can be represented as a metaphorical prism through which social experiences are internalised by individuals, leading to the individualisation of social functions – that is, the development of psychological functions, such as thought, which can be understood as internalised speech (Vygotsky, 1987). Based on the dialectical relationship between outer and inner, Nogueira advances the Funds of Identity concept by suggesting that individuals construct their own set of semiotic tools, which in turn mediates the way they interact and behave. While Esteban-Guitart & Moll (2014b) prefer the term *lived experience*, as it is taken to correspond to the interrelation of all psychological functions as articulated by Vygotsky (1962), the authors nevertheless offer a similar articulation of *perezhivanie* as a ‘phenomenological prism’ which is not seen as entirely internal, but is a process that takes place in interaction with the environment, with people [...] and things’ (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014b, p.75).

Limitations of Perezhivanie in the Funds of Identity literature

While the terms *lived experience* and *emotional experience* resonate with Vygotsky’s notion of *perezhivanie* as a general psychological process (Vygotsky, 1994), neither translation adequately reflects the complexity and nuance of the term in the Russian (Blunden, 2016). In contrast to the somewhat restricted sense in which *perezhivanie* has been used by Funds of Identity researchers, Vygotskian scholars (Blunden, 2016; Clarà, 2016; Mok, 2017) have started to explore the ‘many lives of the term *perezhivanie*’, with Clarà (2016) identifying five-main traditions that have grown out of, and develop, the concept as initially sketched by Vygotsky: *experiencing-as-struggle*, *experiencing-as-contemplation*, *fantasy-based experiencing-as-struggle* and *m-perezhivanie*. Therefore, in addition to the sense in which it is primarily used in the Funds of Identity literature, as *experiencing-as-contemplation* or the internalisation of object-mediated activity (González Rey, 2016), *perezhivanie* has also been understood as a form of *experiencing-as-struggle* or a ‘special inner activity’ in which individuals overcome a painful critical event. Thus, the full implications of *perezhivanie* and how it could enrich the Funds of Identity concept have yet to be

fully explored, as research has focused on younger learners and perezhivanie as a form of inner contemplation (e.g., Schmit, 2016).

Contemporary interpretations of perezhivanie, particularly those that are situated within the experiencing-as-struggle tradition (e.g., Blunden, 2014), however, offer a more systematic and unified theory of the relationship between the individual and the environment, which enables practitioners and researchers to draw upon both the positive and the negative. While there have been a number of studies that focus on adolescents' funds of knowledge (Razfar, 2012; Schwartz, 2015; Wei, 2014), researchers working with a funds of identity approach have tended to work with younger learners, thereby precluding the exploration of more problematic funds of identity associated with adolescence.

The next section explains how Vygotskian scholars, Blunden and González Rey, have advanced Vygotsky's initial presentation of perezhivanie and then details how their work could be used to develop the Funds of Identity concept.

Perezhivanie and existential funds of identity

In contrast to the way perezhivanie has been understood by Funds of Identity scholars as a general psychological process, Blunden (2014, 2016) has proposed that perezhivanie be understood as a countable noun. Therefore, individuals do not simply internalise experience as a whole but rather internalise experiences, as experience itself can be understood as self-contained episodes 'with [their] own plot, [their] own inception and movement toward [their] close, [...] having [their] own particular rhythmic movement' (Dewey, 1939, p. 555). Blunden theorises perezhivanie as the working over of a traumatic or life changing event. Significantly, a perezhivanie can be both positive and negative; and even when life experiences are negative, the working over of a critical moment or crisis can lead to catharsis and integration of an experience into the personality.

Similarly, González Rey's work on subjectivity also suggests how negative experiences can be accommodated within a more positive paradigm, as 'human subjective processes are never moved by one final cause and do not represent stable contents; they flow in time, integrate, and unfold into different forms during the same experience' (González Rey, 2016, p. 311). Therefore, the polarising of experience into positive and negative is potentially incongruent with the way individuals actually experience and make sense of reality. Teachers who over-emphasise the positive in their classrooms may run the risk of becoming out of sync with their students' lived experiences, which are not based on such clear-cut demarcations between positive and negative. Consequently, perezhivanie as defined by Blunden and González Rey, offers researchers a way to integrate negative and positive experiences, and in so doing, enable educators to move beyond a 'regime of optimism' in order to embrace the whole spectrum of human emotion and experience. Based on this, Poole and Huang (2018) describe a perezhivanie as a three-step process, consisting of:

- **A critical episode:** a traumatic experience or a life-changing episode in one's life that leads to a blockage in psychological development.

- **Reflection:** the process of becoming conscious of, reflecting on, and talking about the critical episode with a significant other, such as a teacher or a parent.
- **Catharsis and integration:** the processing or working over a critical episode in order to assimilate it into the personality.

This interpretation of perezhivanie thus lead to the notion of existential funds of identity (Poole & Huang, 2018). Existential funds of identity are so named because they denote issues of being and self-defining that are primarily internal in nature. On the one hand, individuals are free to define themselves as they wish, yet on the other hand, the open-ended nature of self-defining can lead to doubt, particularly when an individual's personal narrative is at odds with cultural master narratives, defined as stories that govern the existence of a collective subject (Esteban-Guitart, 2012) by prescribing and proscribing certain ways of being and acting (McAdams, 2003).

It can be seen that seemingly negative experiences can be converted through the process of a perezhivanie into more positive forms of funds of identity which in turn can be used for personality and pedagogy work. However, the issue still remains as to how existential funds of identity fits into the framework offered by Esteban-Guitart. Is it an aspect of one or all five of the proposed categories or an additional category? The next section suggests how this question might be answered.

Existential funds of identity as an additional category

Based on Esteban-Guitart (2012) and Joves et al. (2015), funds of identity can be divided into five major types:

1. Geographical Funds of Identity (such as a river, a country, a village or a mountain)
2. Practical Funds of Identity (any activity, such as work, sports or music)
3. Cultural Funds of Identity (artefacts, such as religious symbols, national flags or social categories, such as introversion/extroversion)
4. Social Funds of Identity (significant others, such as relatives, friends, or colleagues)
5. Institutional Funds of Identity (any social institution, such as family, marriage, or school)

Underpinning the categorisation of Funds of Identity is the idea that identity is embedded in tangible, historical cultural factors, such as social institutions, artefacts and cultural beliefs (Saubich & Esteban-Guitart, 2011). Ontologically, identity is understood in empirical terms as what a person does or produces (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a). This has been succinctly put as 'we are the product of the products we produce' (Ratner, 2006, p. 13). Moreover, the five categories of funds of identity are not discreet, but can converge to form hybrid forms of funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2012). This clearly resonates with a macro approach to cultural psychology, which has been defined as 'the study of psychological phenomena rooted and embedded in macro cultural forces as social institutions, artifacts and cultural concepts' (Esteban-Guitart & Ratner, 2011, p. 1).

Meanwhile, as initially presented in Poole and Huang (2018), the notion of existential funds of identity was presented as a development of the Funds of Identity approach, one that expanded the categories developed by Esteban-Guitart (2012). For example, findings from two empirical papers (Poole, 2017b; Poole & Huang, 2018) that explored the ways in which a group of Chinese students constructed their identities by using avatars, word clouds and a written reflection, identified negative forms of funds of identity (e.g., identity issues, low self-esteem, alienation) that did not appear to fit with the categories proposed by Esteban-Guitart. This dissonance was initially understood to be the result of contextual differences, as the existing categories presented by Esteban-Guitart were developed within a different context. Therefore, the findings from Poole (2017b) and Poole and Huang (2018) suggested that the five categories of funds of identity were situated in nature, with the notion of existential funds of identity intended to be understood as an additional category that was more personal in nature and therefore more commensurate with lived adolescent experience in the Chinese context.

Critique of existential funds of identity as an additional category

However, there are a number of issues with proposing existential funds of identity as an additional category. For example, doubt about one's body image could be said to originate in an interactive social context; therefore, negative self-image could be said to be a cultural form of funds of identity. In addition, not being sure of one's place in a school or not fitting in could also be seen as a form of institutional funds of identity. This is because *perezhivanie* is the process through which social experiences are transformed into lived experience (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014b; Nogueira, 2014). Therefore, the notion of existential funds of identity as an additional category of funds of identity is somewhat tautologous, as in the last instance, all social experience is transformed into lived experience through social interaction and participation in life (Esteban-Guitart, 2012).

Moreover, imposing a new category of funds of identity on an already existing framework could lead to ontological and epistemological dissonance. For example, from a Funds of Identity perspective, identity, and therefore individuals' funds of identity, are taken to be embedded within the social fabric of life (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a), which are represented by the five categories proposed by Esteban-Guitart. Therefore, funds of identity are not entirely internal or metaphysical, but rather are the result of a process that takes place in interaction with the environment (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014b). Essentially, the relationship between the social and the personal is dialectical, although the social is taken to be *a priori*, with individuals, as mentioned above, embarking on a process of progressive individuation.

In contrast, the notion of existential funds of identity could be seen to be incompatible with the macro-level assumptions that underpin the Funds of Identity concept, as the former negates the process of individuation by prioritising interiority and existence. Therefore, the funds of identity that are generated through such a phenomenological lens are taken to have their origin not in the social world – that is, not embedded within the five categories proposed by Esteban-Guitart, but rather within the mind of the individual. Rather than moving from social to personal, existential funds of identity inverts this and moves from the personal to the social. For these reasons, the notion of existential funds of identity as predicated upon sociocultural assumptions is

inherently problematic because it proposes a kind of solipsism of mind that strains against the sociocultural underpinnings of the Funds of Identity concept.

Discussion

Whereas Funds of Knowledge was a relatively mature concept when Zipin proposed dark funds of knowledge in 2009, and therefore could benefit from such a radical critique, Funds of Identity is still in its infancy and is therefore still finding its intellectual feet, so to speak. While critique of anomalies can be productive in leading to development, as shown by Kuhn (2012) and Handa (1987) in their respective explorations of the concept of paradigm shifts, such radical change can really only be beneficial once a field of inquiry has been firmly established. However, in the case of a new field of inquiry, prematurely introducing a radical break with theoretical orthodoxy could be self-destructive. Perhaps what is required right now for the Funds of Identity concept is accommodation rather than contestation. Therefore, I revise my initial argument as presented in Poole and Huang (2018): existential funds of identity is best understood as an enrichment, and therefore continuation of the Funds of Identity concept, rather than a critique of, and therefore departure, from it. However, the phenomenological aspect of existential funds of identity needs to be explored further, particularly as it appears to resonate with a micro-level approach to cultural psychology.

Given the above, existential funds of identity should be understood as encompassing both light and dark funds of identity which in turn are understood to be complementary modalities of experience. Thus, rather than taking experience as a totality which is either positive or negative, existential funds of identity functions as a conceptual lens which brings into focus the inherent ambivalence of lived experience – that is, subjectivity as an indivisible unity of both positive and negative experiences (González Rey, 2016). Parsing experience into either light or dark runs the risk of reifying experience. Drawing upon positive experiences is necessary in order to dismantle deficit discourses that are founded on negative assumptions of learners as inherently problematic or academically inferior, but at the same time negative experiences can also hold positive resonances for individuals once they have worked over a *perezhivanie*; the skills and knowledge gained from such an endeavour could be used to navigate uncertainties of a new unit of work or the next step in one's life. Therefore, existential funds of identity can be pedagogical and personal in nature. Seemingly negative experiences from the past are refracted through the prism of the present to become strategies for negotiating the future.

Conclusion

The concept of existential funds of identity adds to the Funds of Identity literature by foregrounding the notion of a *perezhivanie* as a form of struggle or over-coming which could be used by researchers in order to differentiate between the multifarious ways in which learners perceive and make sense of their social experiences as internalised lived experience. However, because my focus has been on exploring existential funds of identity as a category of funds of identity, discussion of identity as a theoretical concept has largely been side-lined. Therefore, future research needs to offer a more substantial articulation of identity and its relationship to dark or existential funds of identity. Moreover, the role of dark or existential funds of identity

and adolescent learners also needs to be further explored. Future research could set about researching into adolescent learners' perezhivaniya – or existential funds of identity - in order to identify successful strategies (i.e., strategies that individuals used in order to work over critical moments) that could be mobilised for pedagogical purposes.

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