

# A Study of Identity Crisis From the Perspective of Identity Negotiation Theory—Taking Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* as Example

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*A Streetcar Named Desire* unfolds the tragedy of a southern lady. The conflict between southern Blanche and northern Stanley is the main contradiction in the play. In the end, Stanley drives Blanche crazy and sends her to an asylum. This paper attempts to analyze Blanche's identity crisis from identity negotiation theory in cross-cultural communication, including identity security, identity inclusion, and identity predictability. Thereby it figures out that one who suffers hostile gazes from others in a strange environment, is unable to carry out an intimate and effective communication, which will eventually lead to a sense of loss and despair. This paper puts forward the methods to obtain identity recognition: be honest with others, be sure of oneself, and try one's best to fit in the new environment, aiming to help people avoid identity crisis in interpersonal communication and establish a positive identity.

**Keywords:** *A Streetcar Named Desire*, identity negotiation theory, identity crisis, identity recognition, Blanche

## Introduction

*A Streetcar Named Desire* is a play written by American writer Tennessee Williams, which centers on the intense contradiction between southern lady Blanche DuBois and northern worker Stanley Kowalski. Before getting to know each other, they once dwelled in different cities and possessed different friends. Since Blanche staying at Stanley's home, a lot of conflicts stir up and their identities collide each other. At last, Blanche faces identity crisis and loses her mind. Nowadays, many people cannot find their own identity and they have a sense of loss and desperation, which seriously affects their daily life. In view of this situation, this paper focuses on Blanche's identity crisis from the perspective of identity negotiation theory. Through analyzing the failure of Blanche's identity defense, this paper puts forward the methods to obtain identity recognition: be honest with others, be sure of oneself, and acclimatize to the new environment, through which people can build a healthy identity.

Identity negotiation theory is applied to analyze interlocutors from divided cultures in linguistics. According to Ting-Toomey, identity provides expectations for behavior and motivates individuals' behavior (Ting-Toomey, 2007, p. 1). Every individual owns basic needs for security, inclusion, predictability, connection,

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and consistency in communication (Turner, 1988, p. 1). Identity negotiation is a mutual communication activity. Interlocutors can motivate their identities and challenge or support others' identities. People who receive a steady nourishment for their identities will remain them, those who can't receive those will abandon their identities finally (Swann & Bosson, 2008, pp. 448-471). In a nutshell, a healthy identity requires the feeling of security, the feeling of inclusion, and the experience of predictability and trust. Otherwise, the loss of these will lead to anxiety and frustration, which generates identity crisis.

In this play, Blanche and Stanley are two typical characters who own divided identities. But few researchers attempt to analyze it based on identity negotiation theory. This paper tries to analyze Blanche's identity crisis on the strength of the theory.

### **The Loss of Blanche's Identity**

*A Streetcar Named Desire* concentrates on the irreconcilable conflict between Blanche and Stanley. In her girlhood, Blanche was a stylish lady living in southern America. By contrast, Stanley is a coarse worker living in the poor district in northern America. Since Blanche comes to Stanley's home, the conflict between them begins to brew and finally breaks out. Stanley rapes Blanche and gets rid of her. Blanche is forcibly sent to a mental hospital.

However, from the words between Blanche and Stanley, this paper figures out that high-handed Stanley is in a strong position while Blanche in an oppressed status. Her personal identity security, identity inclusion, identity predictability are not guaranteed in this new area. Their unequal communication environment leads to the communication failure, which is reflected from these aspects: the loss of identity security, identity inclusion, and identity predictability.

#### **The Loss of Blanche's Identity Security**

Identity security is the stability of one's identity. Stella Ting-Toomey, the leader of identity negotiation theory, holds the opinion that "Individuals tend to experience identity emotional security in a culturally familiar environment and experience identity emotional vulnerability in a culturally unfamiliar environment" (Gudykunst, 2014, p. 218). One without identity security would feel lost and restless. Blanche's identity security is ruined by the different environment between the former south and today's north.

In southern America, Blanche was once a lady with a cozy life. As time passes by, she has no way but to leave her hometown and abandon her ladylike life due to the family downfall. She has no relatives except her sister, Stella. Thus she has to count on her sister and sister-in-law, whose husband is Stanley. Comparatively, Stanley's house is cluttered and narrow. The residents here have to earn bread laboriously. The environment and life style change totally. The diversities of the environment lead to a sense of maladjustment and identity security is liable to lose.

In the new environment, her behaviors are filled with nervousity and anxiety. She is so sensitive and hysterical that she usually takes a bath for several hours or has a drink to relax nerves. She always utters out cries violently when something stirs her vulnerable nerves. The hurry-scurry behaviors represent she is restless and frail. Blanche's world value faces challenge and she doesn't receive enough sense of security when encountering culturally dissimilar others, which means that Blanche fails to find the sense of belonging. Identity security has never been established and she loses identity security in the new environment.

### **The Loss of Blanche's Identity Inclusion**

Identity inclusion refers to the degree of our perceived nearness (i.e., emotional, psychological, and spatial proximity) to in group and out group members. People tend to show sympathy and intimacy to in groups while to show indifference to out groups. Stanley is amiable to his in group people, including his wife Stella and his friends. By contrast, he takes up a nasty attitude towards the out group member, Blanche, with suspicion and hostility. So he always rudely shouts at her face, satirizes at her, and even breaks the radio to her face in anger. The failure of a courtship destroys Blanche's terminal hope to find a support in this house.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre's gaze theory, Stanley is the representative of male gaze, who controls and represses Blanche (Hao, 2008, pp. 81-82). Stanley is in doubt about the purpose of Blanche's visit. He believes that his wife's property is appropriated by Blanche and sick of her lodging which disturbs his daily life. In order to find out the truth about money he even makes investigations under the table. In the dialogue between the two, Stanley asks Blanche about the source of her exquisite clothes, but Blanche doesn't answer directly, thus Stanley makes a sarcastic remark: "It looks like you raided some stylish shops in Paris" (Williams, 1947, p. 40). Stanley's doubts deepen, thus he asks her about Belle Reve and proposes the Napoleonic Code, whose purpose is to stipulate he can own his wife's assets.

Blanche has no choice but to turn to her sister due to the downfall of family. However, in Stanley's opinion, she is merely a scandalous woman who squanders family fortune and her external pride and refinement are nothing more than a mask to hide her inner self. Stanley smashes her self-delusions. The back of Blanche's make-believe world falls away (Ruhina Jesmin, 2012, p. 408), which leads to Blanche's tragedy.

The suspicion from people around Blanche is one of the important factors that make her fail to find identity inclusion. The most serious threat comes from Stanley. Stanley learns through investigation that Blanche once lived in Hotel Flamingo with a bad reputation, thus he asks Blanche "do you happen to know somebody named Shaw" (Williams, 1947, p. 86), which makes Blanche very nervous and anxious because Shaw knows her past. Blanche is worried that her past will be exposed and the peace life that she managed to gain will be shattered. Although there is kinship between the two, Stanley regards her as a roadblock to get property, rather than a member of his family. After further investigations, he learns that Blanche did something indecent, thus he humiliates her and gives her a ticket to home. In the end, he even raped Blanche when his wife is in a maternity ward.

Although they live in the same room, Stanley's alienation prevents Blanche from integrating into the family. There is no trace of identity inclusion in this environment but full of suspicion and hostility. In addition, Blanche originally plans to marry Mitch in order to find a stable support. However, Stanley tells Mitch about her life, which makes Mitch refuse to marry her. After being required to leave by her brother-in-law, Blanche loses a shoulder to rely on once more, the desperation of life and the feeling of helplessness make her lose identity inclusion.

### **The Loss of Blanche's Identity Predictability**

Identity predictability refers to a sort of trust. When we talk with an acquaintance, we will feel reliable and relax. Conversely, we may feel anxious and restless when talking with a stranger. "Individuals tend to experience interaction predictability when communicating with culturally familiar others and interaction unpredictability (or novelty) when communicating with culturally unfamiliar others" (Gudykunst, 2014, p. 218). Namely, identity predictability leads to trust while identity unpredictability leads to distrust. For instance, we

can casually make a joke or give sincere advice to our intimate friends while we tend to be uncertain and defensive when talking with unfamiliar people.

There is little trust or predictability betwixt Stanley and Blanche. Stanley is aggressive while Blanche is vulnerable, thus Blanche experiences identity awkwardness and estrangement in communication. Stanley doubts about Blanche's fortune and life. Thus he directly interrogates Blanche for her money. Additionally, he explores Blanche's private life under the table. Stanley's unexpected behaviors occur frequently and suddenly, which makes Blanche anxious because she fears her past will be uncovered and everyone will feel ashamed of her. Stanley designedly questions Blanche many times because there is a gap of distrust between the two.

Stanley doubts about every aspect of Blanche, while Blanche is disgusted with the coarse northern worker. Though they live in one room, they are still like strangers, thus the room is brimmed with distrust and strangeness. They never have a sincere talk. The invisible gap leads to the loss of Blanche's identity predictability. Consequently, Blanche is restless and dysphoric throughout this play.

Above all, the conflict between Blanche and Stanley leads to the loss of Blanche's identity security, identity inclusion, and identity predictability. Identity crisis is the culprit of Blanche's tragedy.

### **Methods for Blanche to Maintain Identity in Communication**

Blanche's identity security, identity inclusion, and identity predictability are threatened by Stanley, thus she has no way to resist identity crisis but shouting, curses, and lies. She is so sensitive and anxious that as long as her identity is challenged, she will lose control of herself and shout out hysterically. Her desperate cry is a weapon to guard her identity and dignity. In order to maintain her good old day as a high-fed lady with purity and virginity, her behaviors are much more exaggerated and artificial. Additionally, she makes up a lot of stories to defend her identity. At last, all her lies are torn up by Stanley; her identity defense is defeated afterwards.

From the Blanche's failure of identity defense, this paper figures out that her desperate behaviors are always backfire. Blanche hides herself totally all the time, which isolates herself from her family and the new environment. What's more, she lacks the ability to guarantee her identity when she faces identity challenges, especially the challenges from Stanley. Lastly, Blanche holds her traditional lady behaviors and she can't get herself adapted to the new atmosphere. All of these reasons above lead to her failure of identity defense. Thus this paper hereby proposes the methods to obtain identity recognition: be honest with others, be sure of oneself, and acclimatize to the new environment.

Firstly, Blanche should be honest with her relatives. In a satisfying conversation, interlocutors should be honest with each other. A pleasant conversation is based on equality, honesty, and sincerity. Blanche comes to Stanley's house with lots of lies. For instance, she doesn't unfold the reason why she comes to northern America until Stanley presses for the truth. Furthermore, she hides her past time with her boyfriend Allen, the homosexual, she also avoids referring to the Flamingo Hotel. All her secrets confuse Stanley and Stella, under the drive of curiosity, thus they desire to uncover the truth. If Blanche can tell all the truth to her relatives, she may be accepted and lead a happy life. In a word, interpersonal relationships with honesty and sincerity lead to a satisfying conversation.

Additionally, Blanche should be self-confident and carry on her own identity. During a conversation, interlocutors sometimes hold divided opinions and maybe they will have a debate, which can be regarded as an identity challenge. When facing identity challenge, the method to defend identity is to believe in himself. In this

play, Blanche is so afraid of Stanley that she always hides herself. She dare not challenge the patriarchy, which is represented by Stanley. She is in such a weak position that she dares not criticize Stanley's bad attitudes, which makes Stanley intensify his efforts to provoke her identities. In order to protect her identity, Blanche should be confident of herself and defend her identity bravely.

Lastly, different places own divided cultures and traditions, people in different places are cultivated by different cultures. When one moves to someplace strange, one should do his best to acclimatize to the new environment as quickly as possible. Blanche firmly carries on old southern traditions and behaves herself as an exalted queen, which creates a barrier for herself in northern America. Her stubborn behaviors and arrogant words annoy Stanley. Since Blanche is far away from her hometown and moves to a new city, she should try to acclimatize to the fresh life. Otherwise, her identity will be questioned. Anyway, in order to avoid identity challenges, acclimatizing oneself to the new environment is a necessary method.

In a word, when one moves to a new environment and faces kinds of communicators, one should carry on several rules to protect his identity. Blanche fails to deal with the issues about her identity crisis. She makes up a lot of stories of her past, she has no confidence in herself. Meanwhile, she shows no positive action to adapt to the new city. Her negative actions lead to identity crisis in the new environment, especially when she meets a domineering interlocutor, Stanley. Generally speaking, this paper puts forward some methods to maintain identity: be honest with others, be sure of oneself, and acclimatize to the new environment.

### Conclusion

The ending shows that Blanche is sent to a hospital. From her frustrating experience, it can be seen that Stanley and Blanche produce some interpersonal relation problems because they cannot achieve a successful communication. Blanche fails to find her identity security, identity inclusion, and identity predictability in Stanley's home, the sense of loss, and desperation surrounds her, which leads to the identity crisis and her tragedy. Based on the identity negotiation theory, it proves that people would get identity recognition through the feelings of being understood, being respected, and being affirmatively valued. In general, Blanche's tragic is caused by the failure of communication with Stanley. Therefore, in order to get an effective communication, one has to evoke his own identity and respond to others. Based on all the analysis above, this paper hereby puts forward three methods for people to obtain identity recognition: be honest with others, be sure of oneself, and acclimatize to the new environment. Only by these ways can one avoid identity crisis through interpersonal communication and develop a positive identity.

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