

# Noise, Identity and Pre-interpreted Worlds: A Phenomenological Perspective

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## Abstract

Identities form and develop through the experience of encountering the world on a day-to-day basis. The world we encounter is pre-interpreted, it presents itself to us as a largely undifferentiated and tacit background against which we organize our experience and make sense of ourselves. Pre-interpretation means that it is often difficult to disentangle identities from the worlds we inhabit unless something goes wrong and we are compelled actively to reflect on the situation at hand. In this chapter, I propose a phenomenological perspective on identity based on the concept of 'noise'. Noise refers to any instance that violates the background expectancies of everyday life and calls for interpretation on the part of those who experience it. I argue that noise can pose identity threats when it challenges the 'pre-interpreted-world' that we would normally take for granted and enact in everyday situations. At the same time, noise also provides researchers with an opportunity to account for the ways in which individuals experience and understand the worlds of which they are part.

**Keywords:** noise, pre-interpretation, phenomenology identity, identity threat, identity work

## **Introduction**

Studying identity - people's subjectively construed understandings of who they were, are and desire to become (Brown 2015) - poses two important interpretive challenges. First, identity refers to meaning making activities that largely occur in the sphere of the inner self and are, therefore, difficult to observe. Secondly, identity processes are largely opaque because they mostly rely on background assumptions that are undiscussable and taken for granted. To address this dual challenge, in this chapter I take a phenomenological perspective on identity, which looks at identity through the lens of noise (Patriotta, 2016). Phenomenology is oriented towards the study of human experience in everyday life (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Schutz, 1967). More specifically, a phenomenological view aims to bring into focus the meanings that individuals create out of their encounters with the world, and the symbolic activities that they employ in making sense not only of the world, but of themselves (Bruner, 1990). Within this framework, I define noise as any disturbance that somehow upsets the status quo and calls for interpretation on the part of those who experience it. From this standpoint, noise refers to any instance that violates the background expectancies of everyday life.

Noise and silence are ontological categories in the sense that they underpin human perceptions of everyday situations. Noise evokes the experience of disorder, multiplicity, dissonance, movement, unfamiliarity, interruption, and irregularity. In contrast, silence is associated with perceptions of order, unity, harmony, stability, familiarity, continuity, routine, and regularity. The interaction of 'noise' and 'silence' provides the soundscape of everyday life and thereby shapes people's experience of 'being in the world' (Heidegger, 1962). As a result, we encounter situations that are more or less familiar, more or less dissonant, and more or less problematic, depending on the context in which they occur and are subjectively experienced. In my own

research, I have often studied noise as an occasion for sensemaking and identity work. For example, I have looked at how individuals and groups make sense of themselves through the experience of breakdowns (Patriotta, 2003, Patriotta & Lanzara, 2006), miscommunications (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009), errors (Catino & Patriotta, 2013), and negative evaluations (Curchod, Patriotta, & Neysen, 2014; Patriotta & Brown, 2011) in a variety of organizational settings. I have found that these manifestations of noise often speak to larger phenomena and signal what people take for granted in their ordinary practices and routines.

Identity scholars have indirectly considered the notion of noise as a relevant aspect of identity processes. For example, Petriglieri (2011) has elucidated how identity threats may undermine the value, meanings, or enactment of a particular identity. From this perspective, identity threats associated with role transitions, denied promotions, end of career decisions, and other forms of workplace disruptions, provide a trigger for identity work (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2011; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Vough & Caza, 2017; Vough et al. 2015). The latter is conceived as the range of activities individuals engage in for “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising” their self-meanings in the context of their occupations and organizations (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626; Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018, p. 889). While these studies have considerably advanced our understanding of identity dynamics in the context organizations and occupations, their focus has largely been on local processes of identity construction, disruption and repair. Less attention has been paid to how these identity processes are inserted in broader processes of worldmaking (Goodman, 1978). This is an important omission, because, as Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 195) have pointed out, identity ‘remains unintelligible unless it is located in a world’ (cited in Brown & Coupland, 2015, p. 1317).

In this paper I argue that noise illuminates the ways in which individuals organize their everyday experiences and understand themselves in the context of worlds they inhabit. In the next section, I present a phenomenological view of identity, which assumes that people create their own subjective and intersubjective meanings as they interact with the world around them. In particular, I focus on how noise intervenes in the connection between identity construction and pre-interpreted worlds. In the following two sections, I provide two illustrations of the interplay between noise and identity by presenting, first, a fictional tale of noise and then a confessional one. I conclude with some remarks on how noise can inform scholarly investigations on identity.

### **Noisy worlds, pre-interpretation and identity**

Identities form and evolve through the experience of encountering the world on a day-to-day basis; identity construction is a process of worldmaking (Goodman, 1979). Understanding individual identities, therefore, requires getting inside the worlds within which those identities are enacted. A phenomenology of identity takes as its foremost task the study of what Schutz (1967), following Husserl, called the ‘life-world’—the taken for granted stream of everyday routines, interaction, and events through which individuals organize their experience.

The phenomenological tradition has conceived the life-world as the cognitive horizon within which individuals seek to realize their projected ends (Buxter, 1987). Philosophers and sociologists have variously characterized this cognitive horizon. Heidegger founds his phenomenology on the experience of ‘being in the world’, meaning that existential identities can only be understood in the context of the world we inhabit and experience on an everyday basis. For Habermas, the life world is the social background to communicative action, ‘a culturally transmitted and a linguistically organized reservoir of meaning patterns’. Goffman

(1974), developing a situational perspective, uses the term ‘habitable universe’ to refer to the ‘seemingly unlimited number of different situations and acts through which [individuals] realize their nature and destinies’.

In the process of organizing everyday experience, individuals subject the phenomenological world to the test of practice. William James (1907), linking truth to the nature of experiencing, famously argued that ‘Truth is verifiable to the extent that thoughts and statements correspond with actual things, as well as the extent to which they “hang together”, or cohere, as pieces of a puzzle might fit together; these are in turn verified by the observed results of the application of an idea to actual practice’. As a pragmatist, he was interested in the ‘working world’, that is, the world that we take as real. In turn, this working world can be phenomenologically described as:

‘...a buzzing, pulsating, formless mass of signals, out of which people try to make sense, into which they attempt to introduce order, and from which they construct against a background that remains undifferentiated’ (James, 1950).

James’ quote reminds us that the world we encounter is noisy and that it is in the context of noise that individuals make sense and figure out who they are, which poses a significant cognitive challenge. On the other hand, identity construction relies on pre-existing classification systems that pre-interpret the world through ready-made categories so that we can perceive the mass of formless signals as an orderly and coherent world. For example, institutions are pre-interpretation mechanisms, designed to harness noise and keep it in the background. As Douglas, pointed out:

‘All the classifications that we have for thinking are provided ready-made, along with our social life.... How can we possibly think of ourselves in society except by using the classifications established in our institutions?’ (Douglas, 1986: 99).

Pre-interpretation sheds light on the nature of individual experiencing and, thereby, resonates with the characteristics of the phenomenological worlds identified above. However, the concept highlights three important aspects of identity and meaning making processes. First, pre-interpreted worlds are pre-given and holistically structured: because of pre-interpretation, the world we inhabit presents itself to us as a ‘self-evident and compelling facticity’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), a largely undifferentiated background in which we ‘see’ without ‘noticing’ (Garfinkel, 1967). Second, pre-interpretation is a sensegiving mechanism, which partially relieves individuals from the burden of needing to think (Gehlen, 1941). More specifically, pre-interpreted worlds provide the discursive resources through which individuals make sense of themselves. As a result, self-identity unfolds as a reflexively organized narrative – an ongoing soliloquy developed from participation in various experiences, which produces a sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1991). Third, at the level of identity, pre-interpretation organizes individual experiences into familiar and manageable categories so that the everyday world becomes understandable and, therefore, habitable. Pre-interpretation partially removes unknowns, uncertainties, and personal insecurities, thus making the chaotic aspects of human life appear well-ordered and familiar.

Pre-interpreted worlds, being socially constructed, are inherently vulnerable and susceptible to the challenges of noise. In fact, they can be thought of as a more or less stable backgrounds that we can more or less take for granted and against which we can exercise everyday practices, construct routines and, ultimately, function efficiently. The emphasis on *more or less* indicates that stability of a pre-interpreted background is subject to disruption, it holds ‘until further notice’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). It is, therefore, important to distinguish between two primary modes of encountering the world and to consider how different encounters may affect an individual’s sense of self (see also Heidegger, 1962). In comparatively stable or routinized

life situations, the link between individuals' identities and pre-interpreted worlds is invisible and largely taken for granted. Institutions and organizations project hegemonic discourses that are generally accepted and provide reliable sources of identification. Situations are experienced as largely familiar, the narrative of self-identity runs fairly smoothly, and identity is reproduced on an ongoing basis. Identity work largely occurs in the background to address minor disruptions in the smooth flow of everyday activities (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002).

The link between the self and the world becomes particularly exposed during instances that breach the familiarity of pre-interpretation. According to Goffman (1974: 8), when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question: 'What is it that's going on here?' In routine situations the question is asked implicitly and individuals proceed to get on with their daily lives. However, 'in times of confusion and doubt' individuals are forced to engage with the details of the situation in an explicit manner. From an identity perspective, noise marks the transition from business as usual to situations that potentially challenge our way of making sense of the world. Noise emerges, for example, in the form of disruptive events, unsettling encounters, traumatic experiences and surprises, as well as more constant strains (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002, p. 626). When this occurs, individuals may experience feelings of shame, guilt and anxiety that call into question their own sense of biographical continuity (Giddens, 1991).

Noise undermines the intelligibility of everything else we thought was going on around us, thus generating a diffuse sense of disorientation and disorder. More specifically, noise may interrupt the smooth experience of living in the present and potentially break the temporal unity of the self. The emergence of a current problem forces the individual to disconnect from the ongoing flow of action and engage in retrospection. Thus, borrowing from Mead's terminology, the totality of the acting self (the 'I') is temporarily separated from the situational self (the 'me')

(Mead, 2015/1934). These experiences may challenge the smooth functioning of self-identity narratives and trigger identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Watson, 2008). Identity work aims to re-assess the world we inhabit while generating new reflexive understandings of ourselves.

Based on the above discussion, I propose a model, depicted in figure 1, of how noise affects the interaction between identities and the worlds in which those identities are enacted.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Noise calls into question the ordinary background – or pre-interpreted world – that individuals take for granted in their everyday practices and routines. An increased level of noise is likely to pose identity threats, defined as ‘experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity’ (Petriglieri, 2011: 544). When people feel their selves have been violated, they will invoke the ‘self’ in their description of what happened (Bruner, 1990). In other words, noise triggers narrations of the self, with the aim to neutralize, modify, adapt, deflect, defend against, mitigate, or even capitalize on the threatening situation and achieve repair (Brown & Coupland, 2015). Repair is a form of identity work. At the micro level, it requires reconciling the split between the holistic ‘I’ and the situational ‘me’. At the macro level, it entails connecting identities to the broader worlds from which they acquire meaning, and rethinking that connection in order to re-establish a coherent sense of self. In what follows, I present two tales of noise that illustrate the framework presented in this section.

### **The man of noise**



*The Curtain*, by Milan Kundera (1997), is an essay in seven parts on the art of the novel. The essay outlines Kundera's views on the evolution and role of the novel in Western civilization, and analyses how great novels reveal previously unrecognized aspects of our existence. In a particularly salient passage of the essay, Kundera recalls a long-forgotten novel by his fellow-countryman Jaromir John entitled *The Internal-Combustion Monster* (1947).<sup>1</sup> The novel tells a story that takes place in Prague in around 1922, during the early years of the Czechoslovak Republic. Kundera summarizes the plot of the novel as follows:

‘A Mr. Engelbert, a forestry official in the old regime of the Hapsburg monarchy, moves to Prague to live out his retirement years; but coming up with the aggressive modernity of the young state, he has one disappointment after another. A highly familiar situation. One aspect, though, is brand new: for Mr. Engelbert the horror of this modern world, the curse, is not the power of money or the arrogance of the arrivistes, it is the noise; and not the age-old noise of a thunderstorm or a hammer, but the new noise of engines, especially of automobiles and motor-cycles, the explosive “internal-combustion monsters”.

Poor Mr. Engelbert: first he settles in a house in a residential neighborhood; there cars are his first introduction to the evil that will turn his life into a unending flight. He moves to another neighborhood, pleased to see that cars are forbidden entry to his street. Unaware that the prohibition is only temporary, he is exasperated at night when he hears the “internal-combustion monsters” roaring again beneath his window. From then on he never goes to bed without cotton in his ears, realizing that “sleeping is the most basic human desire and death caused by the impossibility of sleep must be the worst death there is.” He goes on to seek silence in country inns (in vain), in provincial cities in the houses of onetime colleagues (in vain), and ends up spending his nights in trains, which, with their gentle archaic noise, provide him with a slumber that is relatively peaceful in his life as a beleaguered man’ (Kundera, *The Curtain*, pp. 120-121).

The story of *The Internal-Combustion Monster* depicts a relationship between an individual (the forestry official), a pre-interpreted world (the city), and the eruption of noise. What does noise tell us about the identity of Mr Engelbert, the world he identifies with and the identity work he does in response to a breach of everyday expectations? The story can be analysed according to the model portrayed in figure 1.

(1) Mr Engelbert lives in the countryside surrounded by the familiar noise of hammers and thunderstorms. This is noise he has made a connection with, internalized, and taken for granted over the years. (2) When he moves to the city, he encounters a new type of noise: that made by traffic and automobiles. The experience of an ‘unknown’ type of noise produces a threat to identity, a temporal disconnection between the holistic ‘I’ anchored to the rural world and the situational ‘me’ facing the encounter with the city. As a result of noise, Mr Engelbert’s sense of biographical continuity is interrupted; his ontological security is shaken. (3) Mr Engelbert realizes the importance of sleep and moves across the city, seeking shelter from noise. In the process, he connects the adversities of the present to basic human desires and ruminations about death. (4) Mr Engelbert ends up sleeping in trains and coping with a type of noise he is familiar with. Repair is accomplished by compromise and by restoring some continuity with the past. We should notice that noise is present throughout each stage of the identity cycle, albeit in different forms: it changes across contexts, it shifts between background and foreground, it becomes more or less familiar. This suggests that identity is a matter of perspective from which a particular type of noise is experienced.

The story of *The Internal-Combustion Monster* exposes identity work as the phenomenological process of encountering the world on a day-to-day basis. It portrays Mr. Engelbert’s transition from one pre-interpreted world (the countryside), with its familiar noise of hammers and thunderstorms, to another (the city), characterized by the noise of traffic and automobiles. This transition is experienced as problematic. To Mr. Engelbert, city noise is quite distant from the ‘natural’ and reassuring sounds of the world he had left; the noisy world of modernity seems formless, unpleasant, uncomfortable, confusing, conflicting, and chaotic. Unable to recognize familiar sounds, Mr. Engelbert loses the capacity to sort out stimuli in order to find (hear) the desired or relevant information. The appearance of sounds that are unfamiliar and unexpected

challenges pre-interpretation and triggers identity work aimed at repairing an unrecognized situation. By temporarily upsetting the order of things that Mr. Engelbert would normally take for granted, noise reveals – and at the same time questions – the connection between the everyday life of a forestry official and the city, between an individual and a pre-interpreted world. Noise exposes Mr Engelbert’s understanding of himself within the world he inhabits. To cope with existential anxiety and re-establish a sense of order and continuity, Mr Engelbert has to engage in a quest for meaning - epitomized by the frantic wandering in search of silence. Identity and meaning are finally restored through connecting the current situation with a familiar experience of the past (the noise of trains). The compromise solution achieved by the forestry official highlights the precarious outcomes of identity work and the ongoing exposure of the self to identity threats.

The method of inquiry adopted by John – which literally involved following noise in the field – may constitute the most fascinating feature of this story. It has two aspects. First, the novelist has chosen to focus on an individual’s experience of an incipient phenomenon. At the time when the events narrated in this story were taking place, the number of automobiles and motorcycles circulating in Prague was, we may surmise, very small. Paradoxically, this is precisely what made the phenomenon of noise so conspicuous. Within a context where environmental sonority was still limited, the irruption of noise turned out to be a sort of ‘cosmology episode’ for Mr Engelbert, an event that abruptly displaced him from his established habits of thinking and acting, and seriously impaired his sensemaking (Lanzara & Patriotta, 2001; Weick, 1993).

Today, we live in a world of noise and traffic, one in which noise has receded into the background and is no longer noticeable. Consider the modern city as a pre-interpreted world:

as I walk along its streets, I am largely unaware of the plethora of signals it is sending out: I do not notice the multiple elements that go to make up a city - the buildings, the streets, the traffic, the crowds of pedestrians, the signs, the infrastructures. Instead, I experience the city as a cohesive unit. I see the forest, but I do not notice the trees, so to speak. This is because pre-interpretation is a source of ontological blindness: it conceals meanings that we take for granted within an undifferentiated background. As a pre-interpreted world, the city does a great deal of ordering on our behalf, and provides a relatively stable background for thinking and acting. From this perspective, pre-interpreted worlds overcome bounded rationality by encoding and institutionalizing meanings that help individuals make sense of themselves in relation to the world they inhabit.

Second, the novelist has chosen to focus on a small event with wide consequences. In Prague, Mr. Engelbert is confronted with a world that is profoundly different from the one he has left. National independence, democracy, capitalism, and technological innovation have turned Prague into a symbol of the modern city. Empirically, however, the feature that strikes him most is not the novelty of the changed political climate, but the increased level of noise. An apparently insignificant change in the soundscape – a reversal in the mundane categories of silence and noise – generates a sudden loss of sense and leads to the dissolution of a hitherto stable identity. Noise therefore becomes a proxy for the discomforts of living in the city in the face of incipient modernity, a tangible manifestation of a grand reality that is cognitively experienced in a more immediate and direct manner.

### **Brexit: a confessional tale of noise**

In a referendum on 23 June 2016, 51.9% of the participating UK electorate voted to leave the European Union. The referendum's result will end the arrangement whereby European citizens could relocate to the UK and enjoy residency rights. It forces non-British people to certify their legal status or accept their foreignness.

Brexit can be seen as an instance of institutional breakdown, a controversy around sovereignty and national identity. Brexit introduces a new classification system that challenges the categories of borders, customs, trade, residency and citizenship, among other things. This creates legal uncertainty, which requires the negotiation of a new legislation and the creation of new forms of governance. Zooming in on my personal experience of this event, Brexit appears as a conspicuous manifestation of noise erupting into everyday life and challenging the world that I would normally take for granted. From an identity perspective, and as an Italian living in the UK, some key questions arise: how to continue functioning in a world that has suddenly become dysfunctional? How can I make the transition from one world I could identify with to another world, which is less familiar and in which I have to find new forms of identification? The confessional tale of Brexit exposes a problematic connection between an individual's identity and the political institutions in which this identity is inscribed. As for the previous tale, identity processes can be analysed using figure 1.

(1) The starting point is the established social and cognitive order associated with EU membership. As a European citizen living and working in a member state, I can enjoy free movement and residency rights. My national identity is not a matter of concern. My self is in harmony with the pre-interpreted world in which my everyday life unfolds. (2) Just like the noise breaking into the existence of Mr Engelbert, Brexit can be considered a cosmology episode, which produces a sudden loss of sense and identity (Weick, 1993). Brexit makes one (me) feel unwanted, it formalizes and accentuates the distinction between home and foreign citizens. It forces one to choose between being a permanent resident or being a permanent foreigner. My everyday world becomes hostile; my sense of belonging is called into question; my sense of foreignness is heightened. Distinctions emerge: politically, as factions of

‘remainers’ and ‘leavers’; culturally, as oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’; materially in the form of geographical borders. What was previously tacit and blended becomes visible and differentiated. (3) The noise associated with Brexit draws attention to the question ‘What is it that’s going on here?’ and it requires consciously attending to the current situation. Cognitively, noise exposes March’s distinction between the logics of consequences and appropriateness (March, 2005; March & Olsen, 2006). It generates fundamental identity questions : what kind of person am I? What kind of situation is this? What would a person such as I do in a situation such as this? Having spent half of my life working outside my home country, the European Union (EU) provided a main source of identification during my professional and existential journey through Italy, France, the UK, Holland, and then the UK again. By uniting the countries I lived in, it offered a way of connecting the dots. Probably because of the EU, I never really developed a hybrid national identity; there was no need. Like noise for Mr Engelbert, Brexit interrupts my sense of biographical continuity, it creates a split between identities (the ‘I’ and the ‘me’), generating a feeling of being stuck in the middle. Connecting the dots backward, I feel that my Italian identity had been partly lost. Connecting the dots forward, I cannot see myself living in the UK for much longer. We had family discussions about what to do and whether to relocate back to Italy, reflected on professional implications and how our job status would change, we even became more mindful of our neighbours, most of whom had probably voted for Brexit. (4) Repair is accomplished through compromise and by applying for settled status in the UK. In my application, I had to produce a number of official documents: passports, tax declarations, pay slips, utility bills, bank statements, my marriage certificate, my daughter’s birth certificate. The bureaucratic process made me aware of the plethora of institutions on which my identity as a UK resident is dependent. It also made me aware that institutions anchor identities and simultaneously expose their vulnerability.

The two tales analysed above portray instances of existential noise that challenges the pre-interpreted world that was previously latent and taken for granted. Each tale foregrounds a distinctive type of modernity, which calls into question existing ways of enacting identity (Giddens, 1991). The man of noise of the first tale is confronted with an incipient type of modernity, epitomized by the advent of the institutions of capitalism and phenomenologically experienced in the form of chaotic traffic noise. The tale of Brexit exposes the challenges of ‘liquid modernity’, that is, a ‘condition of the world in which social forms and institutions can no longer (and are not expected) to keep their shape for long’ (Bauman, 2000; 2007: 1; cf. Ahuja, Nikolova & Clegg, 2020). Both tales convey the dramatic impact of noise on one’s sense of self, which stems from the sudden disappearance of the pre-interpreting mechanisms that once provided the stable foundations for making sense of one’s ‘being in the world’. In combination, they illustrate a path of changing identities at different stages in the evolution of contemporary society. The man of noise loses the sense of security offered by life in the countryside and struggles to develop a coherent identity in the noisy world of cities: because of the absence of familiar categories, the city cannot serve as a frame of reference for Mr Engelbert’s actions and long-term life plans. My experience of Brexit is similar. As a modern migrant, living in a quasi-nomadic condition, I can withstand multiple but fleeting social experiences. However, even in liquid times, individuals attempt to grasp anything that provides the foundation for the construction and maintenance their identity. As a result, my own sense of identity slips as soon as the anchoring to a solid institution like the EU melts away (Bauman, 2000).

Finally, it is important to notice that the same analysis developed in relation to the impact of Brexit on the identity of European citizens could be referred to the self-identity of British

citizens. Brexit is an instance of divorce and it displays dynamics that are common to any instance of separation. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage with the identity work of British citizens in response to Brexit. However, since the result of the referendum the noise around Brexit has not disappeared. Rather it has been a permanent feature of media headlines, it has fueled daily debates on what the future will look like, and it has revealed profound divisions within British society. Beyond the simplified outcome provided by the referendum and the tautological mantra that ‘Brexit means Brexit’, the decision to leave Europe has generated an ongoing quest for national identity meaning. Recounting the story on a daily basis, on a variety of different media, is, arguably, a spectacular form of collective identity work.

### **Studying identity through noise**

Silence and noise are ontological categories, which take hold of an individual both cognitively and emotionally (Le Breton, 2015). Noise is eventful: it is always associated with a source and it has boundaries (the before-during-after noise). From this perspective, events are intrusions of noise into everyday life, instances that interrupt the smooth flow of everyday action. Noise signals a tangible presence – it places the self in the presence of others or others in the presence of the self – and, therefore, invites reflection and engagement. Silence, on the other hand, is associated with pre-interpretation. It is the undifferentiated background, which we are familiar with and take for granted. Silence is limitless, faultless, uninterrupted, devoid of history; it evokes absence. Pre-interpreted worlds make our existence inhabitable and comprehensible, until something goes wrong. Noise reminds us that the familiar world we inhabit is nothing more than a necessary, but very fragile convention.

Identities are sensitive to what is going on; they are vulnerable to things that go wrong. Noise draws attention to our sense of what is going on and how it affects our sense of self. Transitions



from silence to noise are important occasions for sensemaking and identity work. When noise erupts, pre-interpreted worlds come to the fore, triggering sensemaking, and the self becomes actively present in order to take care of the situation at hand. However, addressing the situation at hand might require questioning one's connection with a pre-interpreted world and rethinking or reworking that connection. The tales of noise described above suggest a research process for studying identity processes.

*Following noise in the field:* when studying identity processes, we normally look for patterns and seek to detect regularities in actions and behavior. Placing an emphasis on noise prompts researchers to direct their attention towards strange facts, and to listen to variations in the levels of everyday noise. Noise places individuals in a situation in which they are disoriented, out of place, far from home. For the observer, this breach of familiarity provides a productive opportunity to get to know what is normally unknown, unspeakable, and taken for granted: what is noise to the actor is a message to the observer. Following noise in the field requires listening to situations growing noisier or quieter, and observing how individuals engage with the identity threats potentially ensuing from unsettling events.

- *Understanding what noise stands for:* noise elucidates the phenomenological tenet 'finding the remarkable in the mundane' (Silverman, 2007). According to Serres (1978), noise is the 'third element of human existence': it connects the knower to the known, individuals to pre-interpreted worlds, small events to grand realities. This connection is based on interference: noise is a form of resistance to the obvious, a distortion of meanings that we normally take for granted. As such, it requires decipherment, it invites reflection, and it may trigger identity work. For example, *The Internal-Combustion Monster* and the tale of Brexit illustrate how noise can induce figure/ground reversals that provide access to narratives of self-identity and

prompt individuals to reflect on the worlds they inhabit: cities, organizations, institutions, and societies. A focus on the mundane experience of noise helps scholars understand identity processes as inscribed in broader social structures, routines, technologies, norms, and conventions.

- *Theorizing noise*: The world that we encounter as individuals and that we observe as scholars is riddled with tensions between order and disorder, routine and breakdowns, silence and noise that form the baseline of everyday action constitute the context for sensemaking. Noise provides scholars with a lens for connecting identities to facts and things in the world. Theorizing noise is about connecting the experience of events that are strange and irregular to orderly frameworks, codifying the complexity of ‘the buzzing, pulsating, and formless mass of signals’ that is the social world.

## **Conclusion**

Theoretically, this study invites identity scholars to pay greater attention to the ways in which identity is inserted in processes of (pre)interpretation and reality construction. Noise helps illuminate these processes by exposing the precarious connection between individuals and the worlds they inhabit. Pre-interpreted worlds provide the backdrops against which individuals construct their identities. By organizing a mass of formless signals into a coherent order they help individuals cope with their existential anxiety and confer a sense of ontological security. At the same time, identity construction is a form of resistance against the pull of pre-interpretation. That is to say, pre-interpreted worlds allow us to affirm who we are as well as define who we are not. From this perspective, identity work is a position-taking process in which individuals continuously adjust between identification with an organized world and opposition to it. This tension is beautifully captured by Erving Goffman:

‘Without something to belong to, we have no stable self.... Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks’ (Goffman, 1961, 305-320).

Identity emerges in the cracks of pre-interpreted worlds. Studying noise is about focusing on the cracks to understand the often elusive link between identity and the worlds we inhabit.

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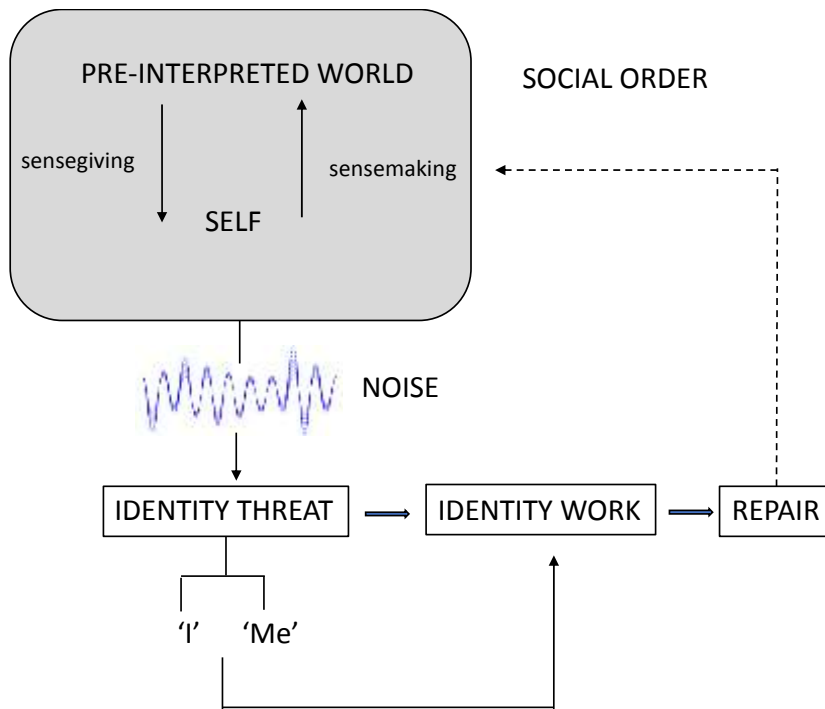
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**Figure 1: Pre-interpretation, noise and identity processes**

<sup>i</sup> The novel was originally published in Czech under the title *Moudrý Engelbert*. An English translation of the novel is not available and I am relying here on Kundera's translation of the novel's title.