

THE PROPERTIES OF IDENTITY*

Identity behaves according to a number of observable properties, as follows:

1. **Identity is social.** Humans are naturally social. To engage in social interactions (including commerce) people need something that persists and that can be used as a basis for recognition of others – an “identity”.
2. **Identity is subjective.** Different people have different experiences with the same individual and therefore attribute different characteristics to that individual; that is, they will construct different identities for him.
3. **Identity is valuable.** By building a history of a person’s past actions, exchange of identity information creates social capital and enables transactions that wouldn’t be possible without identity. In other words, identity lends predictability to afford a comfortable level of confidence for people making decisions.
4. **Identity is referential.** An identity is not a person; it is only a reference to a person. Even if a person develops spin-off personas so that other people know him through those various digital identities, and even if others create profiles of a person, ultimately the collection of characteristics that signal who a person is need to point back to that person.
5. **Identity is composite.** Some information about a person arises from the person himself; he volunteers it. But other information about him is developed by others without his involvement.
6. **Identity is consequential.** Because identity tells of a person’s past actions, the decision to exchange identity information carries consequences: Disclosure of identity information in a certain context can cause harm; failure to disclose identity information in another context can create risk.
7. **Identity is dynamic.** Identity information is always changing; any particular identity dossier might be inaccurate at any given moment.
8. **Identity is contextual.** People have different identities that they may wish to keep entirely separate. Information can be harmful in the wrong context, or it can simply be irrelevant. Keeping identities separate allows a person to have more autonomy.
9. **Identity is equivocal.** The process of identification is inherently error-prone.

* *The Properties of Identity were articulated by Bob Blakley, Jeff Broberg, Anthony Nadalin, Dale Olds, Mary Ruddy, Mary Rundle, and Paul Trevithick.*



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