

Existential ambivalence and Identity - Through the EUM Lens

Ashok Malhotra

Managing Director
Reflexive Lenses Consulting Private Limited
Bangalore, India
Email. ashok@eumlens.in
Web. www.eumlens.in
LinkedIn. <http://linkedin.com/in/eumashok>

Abstract

Ambivalence is an integral part of human existence. We are continuously immersed in contrary feelings, thoughts and actions. At the emotive level, we often love and hate the same person/object; at the thought level we keep oscillating between contradictory ideas (I am strong, I am weak) and at the action level we keep shifting between I will- I will not. Often this see-saw is broken either through a polarization or at least through a marked leaning towards one side or the other i.e. one side is acknowledged and owned up whereas the other is pushed away and disowned. Thus, a person who operates from the stance of "I am strong" pushes aside his/her vulnerabilities. However, the side, which is pushed into the background, does not disappear but continues to cast its shadow.

Human beings are both individualistic and relational. As autonomous and individualistic entities, we define ourselves in terms of our needs, desires, propensities, attributes etc. As relational beings we define ourselves in terms of our belonging systems- our families, nationalities, social groupings etc. The ambivalence operates along both these dimensions. At the individualistic level, the see-saw is of "I am- I am not" and at the relational level of "I belong- I do not belong"

The EUM framework developed by this author focusses on these two dimensions. While the framework posits six Universes (each Universe being a composite set of needs, beliefs, values, world view etc.) the first two Universes are regarded as foundational in identity formation. These are Universe of Belonging and Protection (bedrock of relational identity) and Universe of Strength and Desire (bedrock of autonomous identity) Exploration into a person's orientation towards these two Universes provides valuable insights into the process of identity formation.

Nature of Existential Ambivalence

Ambivalence is an integral part of human existence. We are continuously immersed in contrary feelings, thoughts and actions. At the emotive level, we often love and hate the same person/object; at the thought level we keep oscillating between contradictory ideas (I am strong, I am weak) and at the action level we keep shifting between I will- I will not.

E. Blauler¹, who first introduced the concept, formulated three kinds of ambivalence-

- a) Emotional ambivalence- simultaneous existence of seemingly opposite emotional attitude e.g. love and hate towards the same person/object.
- b) Ambivalence of will- the person wishes at the same time to do something or not do something, and
- c) Intellectual ambivalence – the person says at the same time I am this and I am not this.

Pulin Garg² extended the concept to embrace the whole universe of behaviour which is anchored in the process of owning and disowning, of being and non-being, of doing and undoing simultaneously. He called it the basic generic code of “I am --- I am not” He saw this generic code manifest itself in multiple ways including the following

1. Ambivalency of quality of being

This manifestation reflects a doubt about self- evaluation. In this, the individual conveys simultaneously contrary opinions about the self- “I am worthy—I am not worthy”

2. Ambivalency of the state of being.

This manifestation reflects doubt about abilities to deal with environment. The see-saw is of “acting upon” and “being acted upon”. Thus, the individual may feel strong and potent to deal with the environment or become a helpless victim.

3. Ambivalency to the emotive needs of the self.

This manifestation reflects doubt about self needs and emotive responsiveness to others. Thus, the individual oscillates between “I am loving- I am not loving”, Or “I am receiving- I am not receiving” Or “I want to be close- I don’t want to be close”

All three belong to what **Pulin** called the generic code of “I am- I am not” and profoundly impact the interpersonal relations and role identity of the individual.

Often this see-saw is broken either through a polarization or at least through a marked leaning towards one side or the other i.e. one side is acknowledged and owned up whereas the other is pushed away and disowned. Thus, a person who operates from the stance of “I am strong” pushes aside his/her vulnerabilities. However, the side, which is pushed into the background, does not disappear but continues to cast its shadow.

George Herbert Mead³ linked existential ambivalence to the basic duality of the autonomous and relational aspect of being human. He made an important distinction between I and Me. Human beings are both individualistic (I) and relational (Me). As autonomous and individualistic entities, we define ourselves in terms of our needs, desires, propensities, attributes etc. As relational beings we define ourselves in terms of our belonging systems- our families, nationalities, social groupings etc. The resultant tension between these two sides of our being, is at the root of our ambivalence.

There is a remarkable similarity between the “I – Me” duality and **Arthur Koestler’s**⁴ concept of holon. The term holon means something which is simultaneously whole in itself and also a part of another whole. In a sense, everything can be regarded as a holon, including material, living and abstract entities. Thus, an atom is whole in itself but is also a part of a molecule, which, in turn, is part of a cell, and so on. Similarly, letters of the alphabet are whole in themselves but are also part of a word, which in turn is part of a sentence and so on.

These then can be regarded as two basic dimensions of being human- Parthood and relational orientation on one side and wholeness and autonomous orientation on the other.

EUM Framework

The EUM (Existential Universe Mapper) framework developed by this author focusses on these two dimensions. The framework has been inspired by **Clare Graves'** ⁵ Open systems theory of values and levels of existence. The basic premise of **Graves**, in his own words, is as follows-

1. That man's nature is not a set thing, that it is ever emergent, that it is an open system and not a closed system
2. That man's nature evolves by saccadic, quantum-like jumps from one steady state to another
3. That man's values change from system to system as his total psychology emerges in a new form with each quantum-like jump to a new steady state of being.

Graves called these steady states as "levels of existence", with each level being a composite system of needs, wants, attitudes, beliefs, values and proclivities that are specific and consistent with internal and external conditions corresponding to that level. **Graves** posits these levels as an evolutionary hierarchy wherein the individual moves from one level to another, somewhat akin to **Maslow's** hierarchy of needs.

On the basis of this framework, **Graves** postulated eight value systems or levels of existence. However, his research showed that the values and behaviour of most people were covered by only six level- from 2nd to the 7th. These six levels form the basic building blocks of EUM. However, in EUM they are called Universes and not levels. The main reasons for this are

1. Levels are usually associated with superiority/progression and hence convey a sense of desirability of being at higher levels.
2. The Universes in EUM are not regarded as “steady states” with an individual moving from one state to another. Instead they are seen as existing simultaneously and in constant interaction with each other. In fact, this interplay is at the heart of the framework as also the design of the EUM instruments.

The framework posits six Universes in a spiral like formation, oscillating between the two dimensions referred earlier. One side of the spiral represents the parthood or relational orientation (Me-ness) and other represents the wholeness or the autonomous orientation (I- ness) In a sense, they represent the two basic realities of human existence- Existential Aloneness and Existential Connectedness.

Of the six Universes, the first two are regarded as foundational in identity formation. These are Universe of Belonging and Protection (bedrock of relational identity) and Universe of Strength and Desire (bedrock of autonomous identity) Exploration into a

person's orientation towards these two Universes provides valuable insights into the process of identity formation.

A brief description of the two Universes is as follows-

Universe of Belonging and Protection (UBP)

This is the part of us that wishes to belong to a safe haven where we feel secure and protected. Its primary orientation is towards familiarity, predictability, harmony, and strong bonding/identification with our own kith and kin.

It enables us to have trust and faith in our people, abide by the established norms and customs, and experience a sense of pride in our heritage. It gives us a strong sense of "oneness" with the group(s) we belong to and enables us to accept all its positives as also its angularities.

When this orientation is subdued, it leaves us feeling rootless and not having a sense of "home". On the other hand, when this orientation is excessive in us, it generates a fear of the unknown, mistrust of "outsiders", and fear of disturbance. Consequently, we become closed to new experience/learning and hence become somewhat like a "frog in well".

Universe of Strength and desire (USD)

This is the part of us that is focused on fulfilment of our desires and seeks to do so through our own strength and power. Its primary orientation is towards curiosity, assertion, adventure, aliveness, excitement and competitiveness. It enables us to dream for ourselves, invest in developing our strength and power, question the established ways of our context, venture out in the world, undertake heroic journeys, expand our horizons, and have a sense of dominance over the world.

When this orientation is subdued, it becomes difficult for us to identify our needs and wishes, assert our own position, engage with conflict/aggression, and have self-belief. On the other hand, when this orientation is excessive, we tend to look at other people either as potential enemies to be conquered or as objects for our need fulfilment/self-aggrandizement. It also gives us an unrealistic and exaggerated idea of our strength and may leave us unwilling to acknowledge our vulnerabilities and limitations.

Existential Ambivalence and EUM

Ambivalence in the EUM framework is seen at two levels.

The first source of ambivalence arises from the tension between UBP (relational orientation) and USD (autonomous orientation). The two Universes create contrary forces in the individual, pulling the individual in opposite directions. UBP propels the individual in the direction of parthood and keeps reminding him/her of the need to pay attention to linkages, relationships and obligations towards the belonging context. On the other hand, USD pulls the individual to wholeness and pay attention to own needs and desires. The central message of USD is that “If I am not for myself, then who will be”, whereas the central message of UBP is “If I am only for myself, then what is the meaning of my being”

The second level of ambivalence arises from within each Universe. Thus, UBP is not just a safe haven, it is also a prison- it creates a sense of restriction, bondage and claustrophobia. It creates difficulty in engaging with the negative features of the context and leaves us with residues of shame and helplessness. Thus, on one hand we want to embrace the context, commit to it and experience a sense of belonging, but on the other hand, we want to run away from it. The see-saw that it creates is of “I belong- I don’t belong”

Similarly, USD gives us a sense of potency, distinctiveness and enables need gratification. Simultaneously, it creates guilt, paranoia and fatigue. It requires us to continually watch our back and hide our vulnerabilities and softness. It prevents us from acknowledging our insignificance, blocks us from surrendering and experiencing the gentle flow of life. Thus, on one hand, we wish to dominate, take control and be the masters of our destiny, but on the

other we just wish to be and find release from our obsession with ourselves. The see-saw that it creates is of “I matter- I don’t matter”

Ambivalence and Identity

Human beings are complex, fluid and dynamic. Understanding them through categories of personality types and traits is not very meaningful. Instead one can use the construct of Identity for understanding and working with people. The term Identity is used in so many different ways that it is virtually impossible to give it a clear definition. The normal usage of the term falls into one or both of the following

- a) What the individual **identifies WITH** - social group, family, community, race, nationality etc. In EUM, these are regarded as UBP anchors of Identity

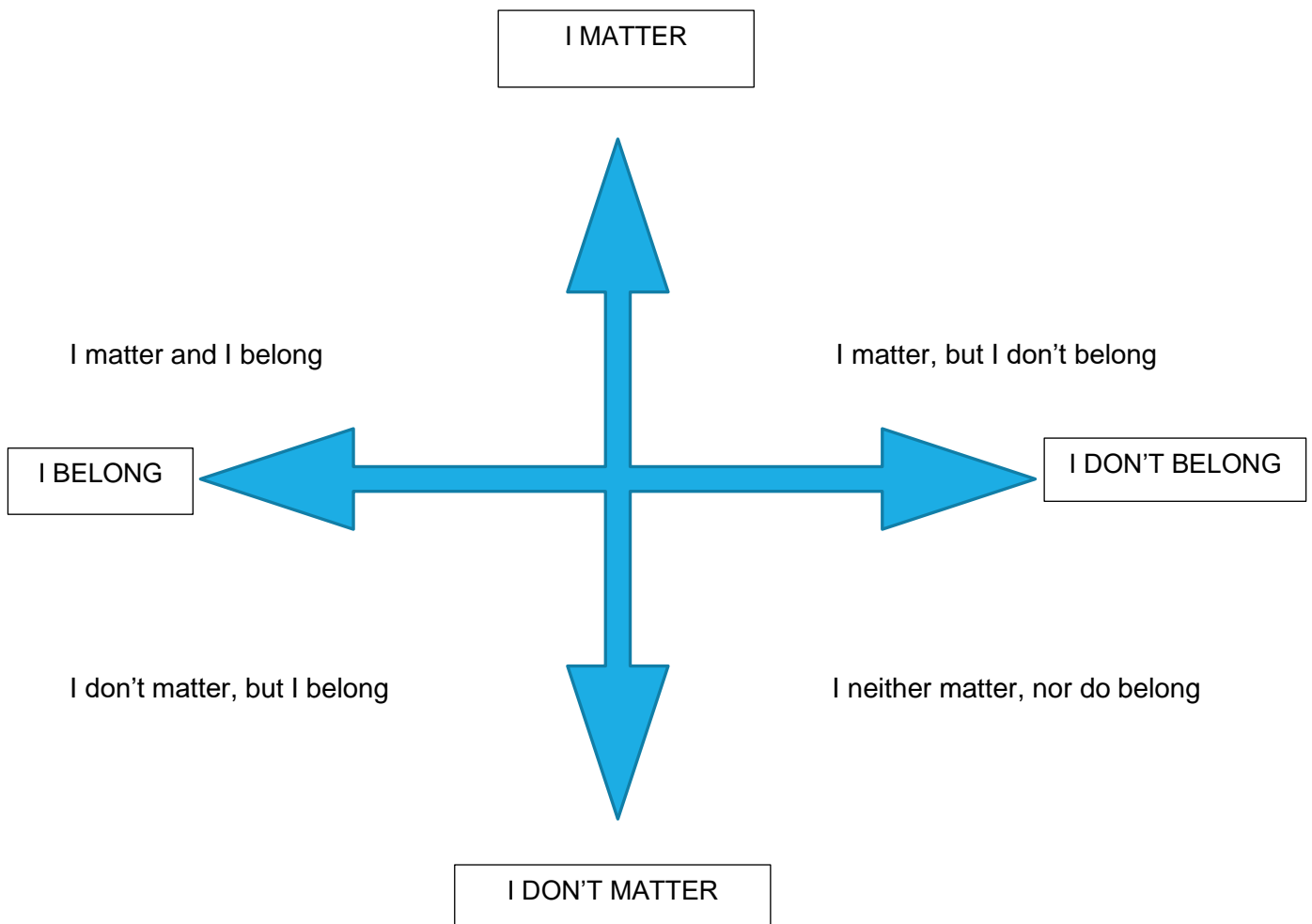
- b) What the individual is **identified BY** – distinctive features, habits, peculiarities, needs, desires, patterns of behaviour etc. In EUM, these are regarded as USD anchors of Identity.

In this paper, we will be using the term Identity in a composite sense including both these aspects. Thus, broadly it can be regarded as a reasonably stable (but by no means absolute and permanent) set of-

- a) Self -concept i.e. thoughts and feelings of the individual about herself
- b) World view i.e. Individual's opinions and beliefs about other people and world at large
- c) Inner responses to situations e.g. feeling anxious in face of uncertainty or getting excited by challenge etc.
- d) Patterns of engagement e.g. running away from conflict or reaching out to people in distress etc.

These four elements configure with each other to form a coherent whole. However, this configuration is fluid and dynamic. It is akin to a flowing river which keeps changing in accordance with the terrain but also has an inherent continuity. The broad patterns which govern this continuity have a strong relationship with how the individual negotiates the ambivalence of being (I matter – I don't matter) and the ambivalence of belonging (I belong- I don't belong)

These two dimensions of ambivalence are intertwined and broadly form four clusters



These four clusters have a close parallel with the story of four princes authored by late Pulin Garg. This story which has been extensively used by many process workers postulates four prototypes of identity – the Scholar Prince, the Warrior Prince, the Healer Prince and the Joker Prince. A brief description of the four clusters is as follows-

1. I matter and I belong

This cluster is akin to the first prince viz. the Scholar Prince. Individuals in this cluster rarely encounter doubt either about themselves or about the context. They embrace the context easily and accept their role in it without question. They are generally unmindful of the negatives of the context and tend to deny all feelings and thoughts which are not role appropriate.

In EUM terms, they have a strong leaning towards both UBP and USD. They prefer to pursue their needs and desires in a familiar setting. They show deference towards authority and are respectful of people in higher status and position. They expect to be treated in similar manner by others. They often experience conflict between need gratification and commitment towards the context. They are prone to be hyper-sensitive to discrimination and potential accusation.

Some of the typical Identities in this cluster are that of Heir apparent, carrier of the heritage, captive, bird in a golden cage etc.

2. I matter but I don't belong

This cluster is akin to the second prince viz. the Warrior Prince. Individuals in this cluster rarely doubt themselves but have considerable angst and grouse towards the context. They tend to display assertion, spontaneity, comfort with conflict and are generally critical of the context and experience it as oppressive/ restrictive.

In EUM terms, they have a strong leaning towards USD but are generally averse towards UBP. They tend to value attributes like autonomy, courage, risk taking and are driven by adventure. They often become unmindful of consequences both for self and others. They carry some mistrust towards the established ways of the system/authority figures and tend to fulfil their affiliative needs through friends and peers. They are also prone to becoming aggressive when feeling insecure.

Some of the typical identities in this cluster are the rebel, the prodigal son, the street urchin etc.

3. I don't matter, but I belong

This cluster is akin to the third prince viz. the Healer Prince. Individuals in this cluster find it easy to commit to the context but find it difficult to acknowledge and own up their own needs and desires. They tend to display high degree of compassion, sensitivity, warmth towards others but tend to neglect themselves and suppress/repress their anger and resentment.

In EUM terms, they embrace UBP but have an aversion towards USD. They tend to place great value on virtues of selflessness, modesty, stoicism etc. and find it difficult to demand their due. They are likely to be seen by others as amiable and caring but run the risk of getting ignored. They get dislocated by direct aggression easily and

tend to become passive aggressive or self-righteous. They are prone to fulfil their stimulus hunger vicariously or through over dramatization.

Some of the typical identities in this cluster are healer, preacher, martyr, orphan etc.

4. I neither matter nor do I belong

This cluster is akin to the fourth prince viz. the Joker Prince. Individuals in this cluster are perpetually uncertain both about themselves as also the context. They find it difficult to act for themselves and/or to take a stable role in the context. They tend to display high degree of curiosity, uncanny ability to see what others don't, propensity to explore and experiment but unable to commit and persevere.

In EUM terms, they have an uneasy relationship with both UBP and USD. They are likely to feel reasonably secure with themselves and tend to handle the ups and downs of life with equanimity. They generally do not give too much importance to the relative power and status of people in dealing with them. They find it difficult to acknowledge their basic and relatively mundane needs such as safety, belonging, significance, and/or may seek to fulfil them indirectly. They tend to get carried away by an idealised image about themselves and the context, and hence find it difficult to put down roots.

Some of the typical identities in this cluster are- the mystic, the wanderer, the seeker, the vagabond, the waster etc.

Conclusion

Human beings are complex and hence it is not very meaningful to box them in frozen categories of personality types or traits. However, our fluidity also has continuity and some patterns, in absence of which we would become unrecognisable, not just to others but even to ourselves. These patterns manifest themselves in reasonably stable configurations, which we are calling Identity. How the individual negotiates the ambivalence of being (I matter- I don't matter) and that of belonging (I belong- I don't belong) has a profound impact on this configuration.

On the basis of the first two Universes of the EUM framework (UBP and USD) we can postulate four basic clusters of Identity. Needless to say, each individual is unique, and the idea is not to put individuals into frozen categories but only to provide a broad framework which can facilitate a nuanced and empathetic understanding and exploration.

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