

**Constructing the Self Through Communication: Applying Communication Theory of
Identity to Barry Jenkins' Moonlight**

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COMM 300: Communication Theory

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December 11, 2025

Introduction

Identity is something most of us think we understand about ourselves until we are asked to explain what this thing called identity really is. We often speak about identity as something within us that we “discover” as we grow. However, a closer look—especially a closer look through communication studies—indicates that who we are does not simply reveal itself to us. Instead, identity gets constructed through messages we send and receive, and through the ones we accept and reject. One of the most profound explorations of identity in recent years is found in *Moonlight*, a film by Black filmmaker Barry Jenkins. The challenge this movie illustrates is that we move through stages of life—childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—and with each stage come messages about who we are and who we are supposed to be. This creates tension between who we are and who we are expected to become.

A look at *Moonlight* with a focus on communication highlights a profound point: Chiron’s struggle with his identity is not simply about knowing himself, but about negotiating himself. Every verbal exchange, physical slight, and silent presence carries meaning. Messages construct identities that one can refuse, imitate, or adopt. Silence in this movie does not represent a vacuum but is a form of communication. This identity struggle unfolds without a safe space for speech. Chiron realizes that communication consists of more than words. It is composed of posture, gaze, and withheld emotion, among other expressions that carry meaning. This shapes his identity not based on who he personally feels he is, but on how he must communicate in order to survive.

This study employs Michael Hecht’s Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) as a tool for analyzing how identity construction through communication occurs in *Moonlight*. The theory points out that identity is formed through interactions with messages about personal identity,

enacted identity, and relational identity, which then become shared in social contexts. What this means is that personal identity does not simply exist within one's mind. This theory also addresses how those with multiple marginalized identities experience identity as a constant source of conflict. By applying this theory to *Moonlight*, one can see that Chiron's conflict is not merely psychological; it is communicative. He receives messages about his personal identity that restrict his opportunities to openly express who he really is.

Explanation of Communication Theory of Identity

The Communication Theory of Identity originated from Michael Hecht's dissatisfaction with identity theories that viewed identity purely as a cognitive or psychological concept. He argued that identity was fundamentally a communicative phenomenon because it can only be observed when expressed. The theory identifies layers of identity categorized as:

Personal Identity: The internal perception of who we believe ourselves to be.

Enacted Identity: The communication choices we use to perform identity.

Relational Identity: Who we are in relation to others, and who others expect us to be.

Communal Identity: The shared cultural stories of race, gender, and class that determine available identity positions.

CTI argues that instead of aligning with one another, these layers often conflict. Hecht calls this an **identity gap**, which occurs when a personal sense of identity does not match expected behaviors or cultural classifications. These gaps lead to confusion, silence, fragmentation, and tension in communication. As a result of these identity gaps, individuals

adjust their performed identity—speech, posture, and behavior—to lessen the social pressure imposed by relational or communal norms.

Building on scholars such as Erving Goffman, who viewed identity as social performance, and Stuart Hall, who argued that identity results from discourse rather than self-discovery, CTI moves forward because of its emphasis on communication as the process through which identity is created. Without communication—in gesture, silence, gaze, or language—identity would have no observable form.

This theory is particularly applicable to *Moonlight* because the film relies heavily on visuals and silence rather than spoken exposition. Jenkins uses brief dialogue and extended quiet scenes to tell the story. Chiron's identity emerges not only from what is said to him but from what remains unspoken. *Moonlight* becomes a visual illustration of CTI: identity is neither fixed nor singular but constructed through communicative acts.

Application of CTI to *Moonlight*

1. Personal Identity: Internal Perception and the Silent Self

Chiron's personal identity revolves around a lack of validation. CTI argues that personal identity develops when an individual has communicative freedom to express who they are. That freedom does not exist for Chiron. He struggles because his mother does not address him in nurturing ways, and when she does communicate, her words are filled with anger and accusation. These messages are not neutral—they are identity-shaping. For Chiron, identity is formed through such messages before he can define himself.

Chiron's silence is not an absence but a form of resistance. He refuses to adopt the identities imposed upon him. His silence becomes a way to protect aspects of himself he cannot safely express. As CTI explains, a personal identity without external recognition may protect itself through refusal of performance.

This occurs in a pivotal scene when Chiron asks Juan, "Am I a faggot?" This question is not merely about sexuality; it is an identity inquiry. Juan reframes the word as something used to harm, rather than something that defines Chiron. This message offers Chiron an alternate framework for understanding himself. Without communication that affirms his internal sense of identity, Chiron's personal identity remains silent and longing.

2. Performed Identity: Using Masculinity as Communication

CTI argues that identity becomes real when enacted. Enacted identity is not what we think about ourselves but how we perform who we are. In *Moonlight*, Chiron realizes that masculinity is a performance rather than a feeling. Masculinity in his environment is enacted through physical power, emotional restraint, sexual confidence, and aggression. His failure to perform masculinity in this way marks him as different before he knows why.

Communication in these scenes is largely nonverbal. The boys confront him with hostile stares, shove him, laugh at his posture, and remove his identity choices through ridicule. This reflects identity enforcement. They are not punishing behavior; they are punishing deviation from communal identity norms.

As an adult, Chiron performs an enacted identity that appears disconnected from his earlier self. His transformation into "Black" is not an expression of personal identity but a survival strategy. CTI explains that individuals sometimes adopt enacted identities that contradict

personal identity to reduce identity gaps. His deeper voice and controlled speech reflect learned performative masculinity. His environment taught him that speaking less and showing less emotion communicates manhood. He does not transform into someone else; he becomes what communication allows him to be.

3. Relational Identity: Becoming Who Others Expect

Relational identity describes how identity develops through relationships. Identity here is co-constructed, depending on how others perceive us. CTI states that relationships offer identity possibilities that individuals cannot access alone.

Kevin plays the most significant role in shaping Chiron's relational identity. Kevin's communication temporarily grants Chiron identities that had been denied to him—being desirable, cared for, and seen. Their encounter on the beach is more than sexual awakening; it is permission to exist. Kevin regards Chiron as someone worth acknowledging physically and emotionally, giving him an identity he cannot create alone.

However, when Kevin later punches Chiron to fit in with peers, the relational identity collapses. This betrayal breaks communication and destroys the identity space Kevin once provided. CTI notes that identity gaps create tension, and betrayal forces individuals to sever relational identities that once sustained them.

Years later, when Kevin cooks for Chiron in the diner, relational identity reemerges. Their silence, pauses, and gestures communicate history and possibility. Kevin's line, "You're the only man that ever touched me," restores an identity opening Chiron believed was gone. CTI helps us recognize why this scene matters: it reopens a path for alignment between personal and enacted identities.

4. Communal Identity: Race, Sexuality, and Cultural Scripts

Communal identity refers to shared cultural narratives that define who one is allowed to be. CTI holds that communal scripts determine which identities are admirable, shameful, or punishable.

In *Moonlight*, communal identity is linked to race and masculinity. The community rewards toughness and condemns vulnerability. To be a Black man is not merely a demographic fact but a communicative role. Emotional expression, sexual identity, and vulnerability are governed by communal norms.

Paula enforces communal identity rather than inventing it. Her rejection of Chiron's softness reflects survival stories where vulnerability leads to danger. Thus, communal identity becomes intertwined with fear. The schoolyard reinforces this identity; the boys do not merely mock Chiron—they police masculinity. Their communication sustains cultural scripts, leaving no space for deviation. CTI reframes these encounters not as personal hostility but as cultural enforcement. Chiron absorbs these messages and develops a defensive identity rather than an expressive one.

CTI Compared to Other Theories

Symbolic Interactionism assumes identity emerges from interaction, but it does not consider layered conflicts or cultural restrictions. Relational Dialectics examines tension within relationships but does not address coercive identity structures. CTI better explains Chiron's

experience because it views identity as a layered communicative process rather than a singular one.

Conclusion

Moonlight is more about existing through communication than discovering identity. Chiron does not find himself because his identity has no room to form without contradiction. According to CTI, he faces communicative fragmentation: his personal identity lacks space to be expressed, his enacted identity is a mask he must wear, and his relational identity is vulnerable to betrayal. CTI is applicable because it demonstrates that identity is not something we possess but something we perform, negotiate, resist, and suppress. *Moonlight* illustrates that identity emerges after communication closes or opens doors to possibility. At the end of the film, Chiron's identity depends not on a fixed truth but on communication that holds the potential for identity without fear. CTI reveals that identity exists as long as we remain in communication with others.

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