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Identity

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Published research and theory on identity far exceeds reasonable expectation. Thousands of articles and books have been written on the subject, yet navigating this topic continues to be something of a conceptual minefield. Like diversity, the term identity has been used in so many contexts, many of them polemical and political, that it is difficult to find any common understanding on which scholars agree. Culture typically has been the way that anthropologists have talked about identity, yet critics charge that anthropological models of identity too often proffer essentialist interpretations of their object, masquerading as objective description. Sociological models of identity, notwithstanding their bold structural claims and attention to environmental and institutional forces, are thought by some to have a thin empirical basis. Doubtless psychology has dominated the field of identity (and self) studies, yet psychological models, for all of their personal and interpersonal promise, are believed by many to have a weak theoretical foundation.

Meanwhile, identity in the philosophical literature has until recently be confined mostly to ruminations on the self: as soul in Plato; rationality connected to, but not coterminous with, the body in Descartes; uninterrupted consciousness in Locke; a stream of experiences which a thing has in relation to itself in Hume; an emotive life in Rousseau; as noumenal self about which we can know little in Kant; as will in Schopenhauer; as an elusive but nonspecific something in Wittgenstein; and as the continuous, purposive struggle of creative power against an historically contingent concatenation of social, political, and cultural forces in Nietzsche and Foucault (Glover, 1988; Perry, 1975; Marshall, 2001).

Yet what follows is not a summary of metaphysics or philosophy of mind. There also is not sufficient space here to examine identity in each of the separate disciplines. Instead, what follows are some prefatory discursive remarks about identity; then, owing to the dominance of psychological theories on identity, a brief overview of some of its salient themes will be adumbrated; this will be followed by a discussion on identity formation and maintenance both in political philosophy and philosophy of education.

Contemporary interpretations of identity run the gamut, ranging from essentialist readings found in the many varieties of culturalist discourse (e.g., aboriginal and indigenous studies), to postmodern dismissals of the term itself. Thus from the one end, essentialists ascribe inherent, lucid meanings to identity which lay beneath

social or political particularities. While essentialists appreciate that circumstances and historical contexts vary, they nevertheless insist that persons know, experience, and relate to something constant about themselves beyond or beneath the linguistic constructions or cultural narratives to which these merely give expression. Essentialist readings of identity, then, are reductionist inasmuch as some particular aspect of identity is believed to be irrevocably and timelessly true. This interpretation of identity assumes that there is something inalterable and determined about who one is on the basis of genealogy, culture, race, gender, or sexual orientation; as such, this interpretation risks erring on the side of identity politics.

Identity politics describes the fact that persons of various minority groups may feel trapped within an identity constructed by others, leading to the expectation that one must represent a particular set of ideals, interests, and behaviors in order to be authentic (see Merry and New, 2008). Essentialism is amply on display in the fields of psychology, sociology, and, perhaps most especially, in anthropology, which gave birth to the notion of cultural identity and difference. Yet the notion that one must identify exclusively with a specific identity marker (e.g., gender) – with all sorts of concomitant purposes and meanings in tow – usually comes at the expense of creating or exploring alternatives, or of critically examining how one's identity is both historically and continuously constructed. Here, Appiah (2005: 113) astutely observes that while the “contours of identity are profoundly real, [they are] no more imperishable, unchanging, or transcendent than other things that men and women make.”

Conversely, postmodernists argue that no such thing as a self exists; identity only describes indeterminate, mutable narratives of persons located within the social or cultural roles they are called upon to play. Subjectivities (in the preferred parlance) are contingent, malleable, hybrid assemblages that never cease evolving and adapting to any number of contexts. As Hall and du Gay (1997: 6) writes:

Identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always knowing (the language of consciousness here betrays us) that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a lack, across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are invested in them.

For postmoderns, then, identity names little more than ephemeral positions and attachments we assume within

the various discourses that circumscribe who we are at any given moment. On this view, all identities – whether historical or cultural – are manufactured, disseminated, and politically deployed (Anderson, 2006; Hollinger, 1994). However, this approach renders insignificant the ways in which persons actually experience their identities, underneath it all, as substantive and real. That is, persons can sense that something about them exists beneath or outside of their cultural or social narratives; that it is they who are the authors of such stories; and that they can sense themselves as being in time and social space.

p0040 Indeed, however socially constructed identities are, one nevertheless feels herself to be Jewish, transsexual, black, or whatever. Of course there are myriad ways in which one is Jewish, transsexual, or black, and these markers of identity do not describe all that we are (the blunder of identity politics), but this point is frequently missed by critics of identity: how we see ourselves, and how we are seen by others, matters, and perhaps especially to those whose (constructed) identities enjoy little if any public recognition. The politics of recognition makes this very point: everyone should have the right to be acknowledged publicly for the identities that matter to them. Recognition is central to social anthropology in the context of ascribed and assumed identity. One is what one is seen to be, and one is as one believes oneself to be.

p0045 Both personal and social aspects shape identity but most theorists on the subject generally agree that identities do not evolve from pristine cultures; rather, identities are products of multiple, oftentimes conflicting, attachments. Indeed, the stable and fixed identity so favorable to earlier psychologists is increasingly being challenged by others who argue that our identities, far from being fixed and secure, are constantly evolving, adopting new meanings, and appropriating habits, customs, and beliefs according to contextual circumstance and need. Indeed, all persons possess hybrid identities that combine, mix, and separate identity components to adapt to different environments. Hybrid identities – what Salman Rushdie called the mongrel self – reflect the plural cultures and societies we live in, and we do not so much discard one identity for another so much as we interchange multiple, not entirely consonant, identities (Benhabib, 2002; Holland *et al.*, 1998).

p0050 In industrialized, Western societies, identities are understood as intensely personal and individual, stressing uniqueness and the independent self. Accordingly, the aim of exploring and questioning inherited values, opinions, and habits generally is encouraged. Conversely, identity in more traditional cultures – including, in East Asia, those which are highly industrialized – is typically circumscribed by one's age, caste, gender, or status. Accordingly, what some have called the interdependent self inclines toward similarity, conformity, and group harmony (Gross and Gore, 2003; Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

Of course, even describing these differences is a symptom of essentialism, and increasingly these cultural dichotomies are being challenged. It is likely that various levels of individual, relational, and collective identity are to be found in most persons irrespective of where they were born and how they were raised. Yet whether one is an independent or an interdependent self, Hogg (2003: 462) observes that group membership plays a crucial role in identity development:

Groups [influence] the type of people we are, the things we do, the attitudes and values we hold, and the way we perceive and react to people around us. Groups furnish us with an identity, a way of locating ourselves in relation to other people. Indeed, our sense of self derives from the groups and categories we belong to, and in many ways individuality may merely be the unique combination of distinct groups and categories that define who we are.

Identity Defined

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p0055 Granting its manifold nuances, meanings, and applications, identity normally refers to the complex and ever-evolving expressions of self-understanding that describe how persons relate, and form attachments, to their historical–social–cultural environment over a lifetime and consciously or unconsciously arrange their priorities and commitments to reflect those, sometimes conflicting, attachments. Attachments are formed with other persons as well as one's environment (hence the attachment to one's homeland, for instance).

p0060 Identity denotes an understanding of who we are, as individuals, and not merely as products of history, culture, or caste. Josselson (1987: 12–13) describes identity as a “dynamic fitting together of parts of the personality with the realities of the social world so that a person has a sense both of internal coherence and meaningful relatedness to the real world.” One's identity is invariably multifaceted and may involve tension; identities, too, may be ranked (and reordered) in importance, some aspects being discarded or constructed in light of new and changing circumstances and experience. Sen (2006: 19) concurs:

Identities are robustly plural, and [one] identity need not obliterate the importance of others [...] a person [also] has to make choices – explicitly and by implication – about what relative importance to attach, in a particular context, to the divergent loyalties and priorities that may compete for precedence.

p0065 Some identities may be temporary, while others endure. Any number of different selves may be salient depending on the persons or environment with whom/ which a person may be relating. Which aspects of identity one consciously or unconsciously summons will largely be determined by her context and circumstances, but also her temperament and emotional needs.

p0070 Yet, while identity is rarely settled or fixed, it vaguely describes how persons see themselves and how they express what is important to them. However variable one's self-concept is there remains a very particular sense in which persons understand themselves, and others, as specific, historical persons in space and time. Who one thinks she is, is unavoidably connected to the self that she was, is becoming, and will be, however little she remembers, understands, or is able to predict about those distinct phases of growth and development. This is consistent with what some psychoanalysts believe to be true of a healthy ego identity, namely, there must be a "subjective sense of continuity of being the same person over time and in different situations" (Côté and Levine, 2002: 121). This means that personal identity will manifest characteristics of having a past, a present, and a future, even if the present or future self no longer identifies as the same person she once was. This, then, is one of the great paradoxes of identity: experience changes who we are, and thus how we see the world as well as how we are seen by others.

s0010 Identity Formation

p0075 Identity formation has been studied from a number of perspectives. For example, there are models of racial identity formation (Cross, 1971), sexual identity formation (Cass, 1979), and minority identity formation (Atkinson *et al.*, 1983). Whatever the case, identity formation describes the conscious process of (re)examining one's feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and ways of relating to others who may or may not share similar commitments and habits. It is to reflect upon "our place in the universe, the meaning of life and death, and our purpose for being here" (Chickering and Reisser, 1993: 207). Identity formation also describes the way in which individuals deal with uncertainty and ambiguity.

p0080 Notwithstanding a variety of disciplinary approaches, contemporary studies on identity formation continue to assume a psychological cast, and none has towered over the field like Erik Erikson. Identity formation, for Erikson, names a process at the core of the individual and at the core of her communal culture, a process which establishes a single identity that links them together. "Identity grows and is nurtured or frustrated in a complex bonding of self and society" (Hoover *et al.*, 1997: 21). The formation of identity involves both competence and integrity. Competence is achieved by one's efforts and is validated by the recognition of others, while integrity is a state of mind about who one is in relation to oneself and others.

p0085 Identity for Erikson is both a personal and social construction, for there is a strong interplay between the psychic self and the social self. It is personal inasmuch as identity is

developed through the integration of various identifications with significant others and reference groups, and it is social inasmuch as it is developed through the internalized roles and appraisals of others. Central components of identity include: (1) a sense of personal continuity over time and across situations; (2) a sense of inner agency; (3) a commitment to certain self-representations as self-defining; (4) a commitment to certain roles as self-defining; (5) an acknowledgment of one's role commitments and views of self by significant others; (6) a commitment to a set of core values and ideal self-standards, and (7) a commitment to a worldview that gives life meaning (Erikson, 1959, 1968).

For Erikson, identity begins long before there is self-awareness, for it is in the nascent bonds of intimate relations (primarily with one's parents) that identity assumes its earliest expression. Intimate relationships, particularly the maternal bond with children, supply the mutual trust and recognition necessary for security and trust. Over time, and with consistent care and attention, it is within these trusting bonds that one comes to identify in a particular way with a set of attachments, habits, and thought patterns. This also describes the manner in which persons are enculturated, which is to say that most persons gradually come to identify with a way-of-being as natural, self-evident, and correct. The foundations of trust give rise to greater possibilities for personal well-being; well-being in this sense describes the experience of being accepted by others as well as a sense of security, satisfaction, and confidence about one's being-in-the-world. A healthy self-concept describes those who are comfortable with their self-image, with how others see them, with the roles they have chosen for themselves, or even which others have chosen for them. (Erikson's notions also supply the foundations for many sociological and anthropological understandings of what makes groups of individuals cohere.)

Yet an absence, or shattering, of foundational trust, for Erikson, portends a looming identity crisis. This crisis (which in late adolescence he describes as identity diffusion) frequently results from persistent doubts about one's ethnic, gender, religious, sexual, or racial identity, and describes the inability to resolve a profound personal challenge when faced with it. On the other hand, another type of crisis known as moratorium, is one that persons must navigate in order to achieve identity at each stage of development. Either way, identity crises arise when the acceptance of one's identity is questioned or rejected by oneself or others. Young persons are particularly susceptible to peer pressure; anxious to be accepted as a group member, intolerance may be expressed towards non-members, that is, outsiders. In Erikson's words:

It is difficult to be tolerant if deep down you are not quite sure that you are a man (or a woman), that you will ever [be] attractive, that you will be able to master your drives,

that you really know who you are, that you know what you want to be, that you know what you look like to others, and that you will know how to make the right decisions without, once for all, committing yourself to the wrong friend, sexual partner, leader, or career (Erikson, 1959: 93).

p0100 If the crisis proves too difficult to overcome, some kind of identity pathology may set in (e.g., narcissistic personality disorder), these normally being the “result of impaired ego functioning caused by a functional or organic disorder” (Côté and Levine, 2002: 154). The result, for psychoanalysts, is that a failure to thrive at any level represents a failure to successfully navigate a much earlier conflict (e.g., trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. doubt) so that a personality disorder is the result of a more primary problem with attachment that is manifested in that period when intimacy is the primary demand for growth, that is, adolescence and early adulthood.

p0105 Marcia (1966) extended the work of Erikson by examining the various ways in which identity formation occurred in adolescence. Marcia, however, was less certain that identities were either resolved or confused. The crisis that Erikson described was not, for Marcia, an emergency but rather a stimulus for overcoming challenges and therefore leading to growth. The result would be greater individualization and differentiation. Marcia also concurred with most psychologists on this point: identity arises from any number of competing – and not necessarily conflicting – influences. Though not an exhaustive list of identity-forming effects, birth order, peer group, gender assignment, sexual orientation, religion, occupation, and culture all influence, to one degree or another, how one comes to understand her relationship to others, including the way in which one shares a set of communally based commitments or practices.

p0110 Needless to say, identities will not arise within, or map onto, neatly prescribed categories. Côté and Levine (2002: 46) observe:

[In] order to understand an individual’s personal identity, one needs to know more about a person than his or her ego constructions and sociohistoric location and opportunities – one needs to know about the emergent interpersonal circumstances affecting his or her behavior, including others’ perceptions of past personal-identity displays, labels that might have been affixed to him or her by others, prejudices faced, gossip relevant to the person, multiple and contradictory pressures to conform, and so forth.

p0115 Perhaps one truism seldom noted by psychological identity theorists is that many identities also are formed in resistance to peer or parental expectations, as well as to one’s inherited group identity or membership. Further, preferring an interdependent and relational model of

identity formation, some feminist critics (Gilligan, 1982) of Erikson – and moral development theorist Lawrence Kohlberg – have objected to their purported androcentric preference for autonomy and independence as signs of identity achievement.

Philosophical Trends

In political philosophy, communitarians have long argued that personal identity is entirely dependent on one’s inherited cultural context. Parekh (2000: 159) expresses this well:

[C]ulture gives coherence to our lives, gives us the resources to make sense of the world, stabilizes our personality, and so on. Its values and ideals inspire us, act as our moral compass, and guide us through life; its arts, rituals, songs, stories and literature fill us with joy and add colour and beauty to our lives; and its moral and spiritual wisdom comforts and helps us cope with the inevitable tragedies of life.

Some cultural identities are recognized and protected by dominant beliefs and practices and enjoy a level of identity capital that those in minority groups do not. Identity capital describes the various investments that persons make about who they are, but the term also expresses a series of transactions and exchanges with others that validate or invalidate one’s personal or social identity. Yet where identities appear to be under threat owing to a weakened cultural base, well-being itself appears threatened to some, thus leading to efforts to protect and maintain (fixed) cultural identities. Some have even argued that the state ought to underwrite the protection of certain imperiled cultures in order that the identities of their members may remain intact (Margalit and Halbertal, 1994). Meanwhile, postmodern critics, such as Appadurai (1996), argue that minorities in many parts of the world are at least as artificial as the majorities they seem to threaten, while liberal critics have noted that the problem with cultural rights is that it seeks to uncritically protect groups and not the individuals within them. More will be said about this in the following text.

Kymlicka’s (1989) *Liberalism, Community and Culture* marked a watershed. By far his most interesting and controversial claim has been that culture – and by extension, cultural identity – is, in Rawlsian terms, a primary good. That is, like income, basic liberties, opportunities, and a social basis for self-respect, culture is necessary in order to flourish as a human being. This is because cultures supply us with our most basic identities, facilitate trust between ourselves and others, and promote general well-being among others who share our way of life. Cultures also supply persons with the context for choice, and thus enable freedom and autonomy.

p0135 The implications for identity are clear: identities arise from within a given cultural context. To be sure, many choices are already made for us, inasmuch as our cultures provide a limited range of options. Importantly, however, while our cultural identities may be given, for Kymlicka it remains for persons to form, pursue, and revise their conceptions of the good life, and this includes how we see ourselves as individuals and in relation to others. Interestingly, Kymlicka argues that some groups, owing to past and present discrimination, are not effectively able to choose or to act unless corrective measures are taken by the state (e.g., affirmative action) to level the playing field. These corrective measures also may require considerable cultural protection of indigenous (though not immigrant) groups. Yet, as a philosophical liberal, Kymlicka is ultimately concerned with individual freedom and autonomy, and therefore argues that persons need to be free to revise or even cast off their cultural identity if they are unable to live it well from the inside. As such, one's identity is not fixed or determined by cultural membership.

p0140 Kymlicka's views have been strongly criticized from several directions. First, communitarians argue that culture provides such depth of meaning and direction that one's identity is both circumscribed and bound by it. In Sandel's (1982) terms, the self is irrevocably encumbered. Additionally, there is resistance to what some interpret as a liberalizing agenda in Kymlicka's insistence that persons ought to autonomously subscribe to their cultural identities, that is, rationally and critically reflect upon who they are. Most cultural identities, they argue, are not open to revision, nor should they be.

p0145 Liberal critics of Kymlicka mostly target two areas. Some (e.g., Barry, 2001) argue that Kymlicka's cultural defense assumes too unspoiled a notion of how cultures actually are formed and operate, and further, ignores the fact that identities are unavoidably hybrid and complex. Arguing against the one person-one culture model, Waldron (1996) insists that while a person needs cultural attachments for a meaningful identity to develop, a homogeneous, stable, or unaltered culture is not required, nor is one likely to find it. Further, cultural characteristics do not tell us all we need to know about individuals. Rather, positing the one person-many fragments substitute, Waldron argues that in this postmodern, post-Fordist, globalized world the idea of absorbing only one culture – let alone the idea that any univocal culture exists – is implausible.

p0150 Concerning Kymlicka's claim that some vulnerable cultures may need state protection in order to help preserve threatened identities, critics note that cultures are not static entities that can be preserved by state intervention except in the most artificial way. Indeed, state protection will only sanction contestable expressions favored by a minority group's leadership. Further, state intervention in order to protect the identity of a minority population suggests that persons are unable (or unlikely) to adapt, and

thus need assistance in order to weather the storm of cultural change. Indeed, Waldron suggests that there is something very paternalistic about the assumption that some are better able than others to acclimate to change.

Still others, notably Okin (1998), point to the problems with defending minority group rights, however mistreated these national or indigenous minorities may have been in the past, or continue to be. Her concern is with a cultural group's most vulnerable members, women and children. She points out that sexual discrimination is rarely overt and states are rarely able or willing to patrol the private sphere. Finally, all liberal critics argue that cultural protection conflates the interests of the adult members with those of the children, and this portends difficulties with the younger generation being able to decide for themselves whether they wish to identify with the culture of their parents.

p0160 In philosophy of education, identity formation and maintenance has been a theme most frequently taken up in debates over religious (and recently, home-) schooling. An education that aims to strengthen identity and the commitments that derive from it can be described as a culturally coherent education (Merry, 2005). Cultural coherence describes a continuity of commitments, values and beliefs between the home and school which reinforces a child's cultural or religious identity and builds self-confidence and trust with others who share these commitments. While not without its critics, arguments for cultural coherence operate on the assumption that persons experience emotional stability by identifying primarily (though perhaps not exclusively) with a particular notion of the good life. Further, advocates of culturally coherent education recognize that limiting the range of identity choices/ options, particularly for young children, helps to solidify identity and enable agency to act upon the meanings one attaches to those identities, including the capacity to pursue and revise their self-understandings and attachments.

p0165 One advocate of this approach, Burt (1994), argues that excepting for cases involving abuse or neglect (a contested terrain if there ever was one), parents ought to have unchallenged prerogatives to raise children in ways specific to cultural or religious attachments. This is necessary, she argues, for equipping children with the necessary psychological resources to make sense of their inherited world and to live well. As a liberal, Burt stresses the importance of cultivating autonomy but argues that this can be done in a manner consonant with the parent's beliefs or cultural and religious practices. She also acknowledges that freedom to exit one's community is important, but believes that the resources to do this will come about either through exposure to outside influences or, more likely, by engaging with counter narratives within one's own tradition.

p0170 With culturally coherent school models, there are worries that parents and teachers may not only discourage

critical thinking and dissent, but also use coercion and fear to achieve conformity. The obligatory authority of certain religious texts, or the charismatic authority of community leaders often distinguishes acceptable (e.g., heterosexual) identities from unacceptable ones. Further, critics of this approach to parenting and education insist that too little attention is given to the cultural construction and historical development of any assumed identity. Thus, children must not only be exposed to views outside of one's family and immediate community, but they must meaningfully engage with others whose views are decidedly different before it can be said that they have an informed understanding of what it means to live an identity from the inside. Finally, critics of culturally coherent parenting and education worry over the conflation of the interests, attachments and identities of children with those of their parents. Debates among philosophers of education continue over whether an upbringing to anchor identity during the primary grades is desirable, even necessary, in order to provide children with a foundation upon which to make comparative judgments about alternative identities, or whether children ought to be instructed and acculturated in ways that depart more manifestly from the opinions and habits of the parents (Feinberg, 2006; MacMullen, 2007; Merry, 2007).

See also: Liberalism and liberal education (00562); Postmodernism (00567).

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Non-Print Items

Abstract:

In this article, Merry first offers some prefatory discursive remarks about identity; then, owing to the dominance of psychological theories on identity, a brief overview of some of its salient themes will be adumbrated; this will be followed by a discussion on identity formation and maintenance both in political philosophy and philosophy of education, with consideration for both postmodern as well as liberal understandings.

Keywords: Culture; Essentialism; Hybridity; Identity formation; Identity politics

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