

## Identity

*Identity*: another fuzzy word we suffer an overdose of. It seems to put into a time perspective what has been previously referred to as mind (as in ‘my mind’) and as self (as in ‘myself’). It seems to point at a person’s self-conception or to some others’ individuality. It also serves us to mention others’ group affiliations (such as ‘national identity’ and ‘cultural identity’).

Generally speaking, identity is mostly assumed to be a mental substance somewhere inside us, independent of the body—yes, the duality with the homunculus again! So that if a person is considered to be essentially her mind, which is also immaterial, then the person’s identity can be considered to be persistent for it is not ruled by the bodily changes that we all undergo. This approach would allow us to believe that ‘young’ minds or identities can be located in ‘old’ bodies. (We, older people, love the idea, even when we understand these concepts to be nonsense from an empirical perspective!).

The belief that there is a mental substance called identity (even when we call identity a narrative, things do not change much) raises multiple problems, many of which we have already mentioned for the concepts we have previously discussed. Let’s begin from this assumption: perception and experience are dependent on stimuli that arrive at sensory organs, which in turn produce action. Consider this example: we say/(feel) ‘we long for home’ and we take a plane back home or we say/(feel) ‘we are hungry’

and we go to the refrigerator to get some food. The second example is easier to accept, even if you are not a great believer in empiricism. You may be able to imagine material activity in your stomach that transmits electro-chemical pulses to the brain, which sends similar stuff to legs for them to move—towards the refrigerator. The longing for home (let's say, you are a Greek of the diaspora with a 'strong' Greek identity who lacks what Greece has to offer in terms of strengthening your identity and you need to visit Greece to fill your Greek identity batteries, which have been weakened by your diasporic experience) or the loving for someone (without whom your sense of identity is not whole) is much more difficult to accept for our modern mind. It is not the body that longs or loves but the mind, the self, the individual, or identity (the place where all come together). The problem is that it is very difficult to explain how immaterial non-substance can cause neurons in the brain to fire and muscles to contract in the correct manner (we elucidate these issues in the final chapters).

People have not 'had' identities since the dawn of civilization (civilization might still be in its dawn according to the parameters you choose to consider). Identity as applied to people is a rather new invention. Identity, of course, is not a new word, it has been around for a while, it just did not mean what it means today. Identity is a word borrowed from mathematics and chemistry where an identity element (or neutral element) is a special type of element of a set with respect to a binary operation on that set. As such, it leaves other elements unchanged. So how can identity be more than what you are anyway? You are what you are, not your identity.

But what exactly does it mean to be what you are? Could it mean that we are just our material bodies? Well, the answer is yes, for that is what we are. At the most, we are our bodies and the trajectories these bodies have lived including the contexts in which these trajectories have taken place and all participants (humans and material objects, etc.) in them. These trajectories mark our bodies as we, while trajecting them, mark others and thus we and others change in interaction.

We should certainly ask what historical material and intellectual processes have made identity, a term traditionally anchored in the disciplines of mathematics and chemistry, become during the 1950s and 1960s the precursor of individuality (as in the work of Erikson, 1959), and through its '(identity) crisis' to represent the process of individuation from family or group, to soon take a radically new turn and be linked to ethnicity and groups of sorts in the social sciences (e.g., Allport's work on prejudice, 1954)? The space we have here does not allow us to review the long

Western/occidental history that has attached this concept to self, individual and person; the terms without which modern identity has no reality. And yet it is worth reminding ourselves, again, that ‘self’ is a peculiar term that the Oxford English Dictionary says in 1680 was conceived as “*Anti-Christ and Anti-God in the world*”; and that individual/person is no less a peculiar term about which Geertz (1984) reminds us, ‘the Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe ... is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures’ (p. 126); or that personality derives from ‘persona’ (Latin for mask).

It is difficult to acknowledge what Geertz is reminding us, for having been raised in the Greek Christian tradition (should we add male white tradition?), we have become accustomed to seeing that which is human as being elevated from all other (godly) creations. A duality in the creation is present as well. There is that which is human and then there is ‘other’. One of the great problems of this perspective is that it leaves the definition of that which is human open for discussion and, as we well know, the West has unfortunately, through othering processes, made many humans not belong to that which is human. But identity does not only concern the psychological individual level. Sociologists are also interested in identity while identifying and explaining the nature of identity as a social phenomenon. That is, they are interested in the relationship between, for example, social categories such as age and gender and how these affect people’s perception of both themselves and their relationship to others. In this respect, they are particularly interested in the various ways that different cultures develop and use biological categories (age, sex, ethnicity and so forth) and physical categories (occupation, region and so forth) as crutches around which individual and group identities are built. True, in their case, at least at times, these group identity categories are conceptualized as being the product of human activity and interaction, but folk use and many times academics reify and essentialize these categories again. Gender or ethnic identity might be social but fast enough they become again essential qualities of individuals—I’m a woman or I’m French. My womanhood or Frenchness, though a social category, is not what we do but who we individually are, inside again. The sociological category becomes internalized and though sociologists believe identity to be a dynamic feature of social life, constantly evolving and changing, at times, rapidly and dramatically, yet, for most of us, slowly and imperceptibly it becomes a feature of our individual inside. Or, at least, we believe so.

These social identity categories represent attempts to understand and explain the differences that exist between people. As if it was clear what exactly we mean by differences, and as if differences would really exist among people. They involve attempts to construct explanations for observed factual or empirical differences. What is surprising to us is three-fold. First, the belief that the differences between men and women, for example, are differences indeed (without ever asking ourselves how is it that we pay attention to such a difference, while disregarding, for example, as a difference the difference between the length of the nail of the thumb among humans). Second, the need to explain a difference such as, for example, the difference between man and woman (as if such differentiations are ‘really’ needed; if for a moment you consider they are needed for the sake of reproduction forget it, for this is true only given present normative conceptions of family in the West). Last, the fact that the explanation usually ends up being abstracted from the realities of the doings that made the difference different from the start. We could have easily said ‘I’m a citizen of Germany’ or ‘I’m a human of male sex’. It is so easy at times to correct language use that it is frightening and yet encouraging. Being from Germany or of male sex still allows for equality at the human or citizen level without imposing the imprisonment in predetermined essential categories.

A nice exception to the preceding examples is the way by which modern states approach identity. Modern states are indeed the precursors of a strong sense of identity without which they cannot survive, and yet we cannot approach the customs clerk at the German border and state that we have a strong sense of identity as Germans and then expect to be allowed into Germany! Nation-states are serious institutions to allow for such weak evidence to earn us the right to enter any country; some formal German ID or passport would be required. For modern nation-states, identity has materiality in the form of passports or identity cards (which though having a long and varied history have been universalized starting in the eighteenth century), which can be gained only through legal material processes. Some of these processes rest on historical constructed facts that still need to be ‘empirically’ demonstrated such as the case for *Jus sanguinis* (Latin: right of blood—a principle of nationality law by which citizenship is not determined by place of birth but by having one or both parents who are citizens of the state). Nation-states will not give in easily to non-evidence-based assumptions. And yet again, in today’s political realities, nation-states succumb with ease to essentialized identitarian perspectives,

for if there is a ‘terrorist’ (the quotation marks are in place for today you never know who gets called a terrorist) attack and it was conducted by immigrants or siblings of immigrants who belong to the Muslim faith, it is assumed that they conducted it because they are Muslim.

When thinking more specifically about education, identity is another word that is around to be used and abused. It seems to belong to the same family as self, mind and individuality and in this sense, what we have said earlier for these concepts seems to work for identity as well. The most common use of the term identity in psychology and thus, given the supremacy of psychological language in educational jargon, is to describe personal identity, or the idiosyncratic things that make a person unique, which end up never being material but essential and hidden from the eye. Available only to those privileged who are able to identify them, judge them, record them, and when necessary, remediate them. In this sense, identity functions similarly to the true self we critiqued earlier.

In education, we also find the social identity perspective. Similar to what we have already mentioned, social identity points now at the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual but also to distinctive characteristics shared by all members of a particular social category or group (we will soon return to this subject in our chapter on culture). This becomes obvious in the frequent characterizations of ‘us/them’—how we often idealize a group to which we claim we belong (e.g., nation-state) while demonizing ‘others’. In this sense, we teach our children that everyone who belongs to a group is the same and has certain characteristics, namely, all French or German, all Muslims or Christians, all gays or lesbians, all Blacks or Whites, are rendered the same and if not exactly the same, similar enough to be recognized as belonging to the same group.

Undertaking a long critique of the concept of identity in its traditional positivist psychological meaning is unnecessary, as a great deal of academic work has been devoted to this issue (see Bakhurst, 1995; Gee, 1992; Hall, 1996; Harre & Gillett, 1994). This work points to the relatively modern appearance of this concept and its close connection to socio-historical and philosophical developments in the last 400 years of Western intellectual history. Identity as a unitary and autonomous construct has come under attack as being a product of exclusionary power relations (Bhabha, 1994), a monologic posture that tries to overcome through domination that which is ‘by nature’ dialogic: the self and identity (Bakhtin, 1981; Mead, 1934). Similarly, social identity and its constitution have been analyzed as the product of power relations that establish dichotomous hierarchies

(Laclau, 1990) in which the powerful attain the status of essentiality while the weak are reduced to the rank of an unfortunate but necessary accident (e.g., man/woman, Black/White, Protestant/Catholic).

The impact of social identity is tremendous in education. The powerful machinery developed particularly by the nation-state mostly in the shape of massive educational efforts that market universal (anonymous) literacy, has been successful in making seem natural or banal, as Billig (1995) would have it, the detailed practices through which nation-states become almost invisible settings. Theoreticians have identified the national structure as one of the cruelest systems on the historical scene (Bhabha, 1990; Mann, 2004). For the community to be imagined in its national oneness (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1983), borders had to be widened and groups lumped together through homogenizing efforts; group identity had to be reified and one's relation to the sovereign strengthened so as to consolidate that new generations 'belong' to one national group or another and 'differ' from one another.

We worry about the work this sense of identity does in education. Needless to say that the same surgeons we consulted for the previous concepts discussed readily answer in similar ways to our queries regarding the existence of individual, social or any other sort of identity somewhere inside our bodies—'no, we have not found it' they say! Yet in total disregard of the empirical reality, identity is used, at times, to explain some educational results in need of explanation; as it was used earlier to explain group or individual differences. It is used in a kind of circular reasoning, an insult to scientific reasoning.

We seem to have forgotten that identity, as we have already mentioned, is a word borrowed from mathematics where an identity element (or neutral element) is a special type of element of a set with respect to a binary operation on that set. As such, it leaves other elements unchanged when combined with them. In education, we seem to do a lot with a word, which in its origin left it all the same. Zero (0) is called the additive identity number because adding zero to a number will not change it and one (1) is the multiplicative identity number for any number multiplied by one remains constant.

In any case, in educational settings the attached identity becomes at times essential to explain facts related to the educational achievements of students. Such was the case in the past for (many) Jews in the West whose Jewishness could help explain their success as if there was a (an essential) Jewishness that guided from within the hand that produced the correct answers for

mathematical complex exercises or violin or piano mastery (Gilman, 1997) (the similarity of this perspective to the essentialized Nazi perspectives is notorious!). Needless to say, these characterizations could (and should) be considered positive prejudice with its (hidden) accompanying racism. Jews get many Nobel Prizes because they are Jewish, because they have the Jewish ‘genius’—another funny word attached to the individual in modernity or certain groups in spite of its Latin etymology (from root *gene*—‘to produce, give birth, beget’), which points at its Greek origin meaning ‘being born’ (Greek γεννάω give birth), something all humans seem to do, not just Jews. More recently, Asians seem to have taken the place of Jews in countries such as the United States, but the processes and results are similar (hidden racism and/or positive prejudice) (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007).

We worry about this, a lot, but less than when similar processes are applied to marginalized minorities such as the Muslims in Europe or the Afro-Americans in the United States. When educational failures are not only attached to individuals (as in the earlier examples) but in a second round to their supposed groups, our worries double. Identity, the individuals’ or the groups’, seems to handcuff the individual from inside. This identity that handcuffs the individual is attached from the outside by the observer (the one that identifies), as if it was available to the observer in spite of it not being empirically available at all. It is just assumed because of the stereotypes the outside individual observer has. The individual might not even identify with this assumed identity, but he has no way out, he has been imprisoned from the inside by an identity others attach to him. We hope we can all agree that being a Muslim, a Jew or French is not an acceptable explanation to why any one of these three fail or succeed in school. If we do not agree, we are all in deep trouble, as we indeed are.

As is the case for many other notions, if the concept identity functions in the outside world, if identity produces work and consequences, it ends up being incorporated by the individual who now accepts it as natural—as water for/to the fish. So the individual has now an identity and makes use of it. At the individual level, this same constructed identity serves him well to explain/defend/justify multiple events/actions/results. It could serve to support requests for special consideration or justify failure or success. All in all, it reflects the (mis)use of identity in the outside.

Our approach to this concept asks us to move away from the metaphysical, away from that which lacks empirical evidence: moving away from traditional questions of *why*, *who* or *what* one is to new questions of

*when, where* and *how* one is. Or as Carbaugh (1996) would have it, what we are

Depends partly on ‘where’ I am, with whom I am, and what I can ably do there, in that scene, with those people, given the (material and symbolic) resources that are available to the people there. The primary ontological site of identity is, then, not solely psycho-biological, although these might turn out to be active features in some scenes. Who I am, from this vantage point, depends upon both actual scenes and sequences of living, and what I become as I interact through these situated, communication practices. (p. 24)

What we suggest, and expand on later in the book, is a move in educational practice away from epistemologies that emphasize the notion of reified and abstract views of identity (Sampson, 1993). We argue for understanding identities as negotiated performances and practices that recognize individuals as co-participants in complex socio-historical-political contexts. We recognize this step—away from ‘what’ and toward ‘when’ and ‘how’—as necessary but not entirely sufficient. Putting an emphasis on the constituted nature of identity does not offer solace in conflict situations where deep suffering arises from rigid labels of identity that create a marginalized status with very real consequences. *We need more.* We need to allow the social to predominate over the ideological without ignoring the power relations involved, which often make the social and the ideological difficult to distinguish.

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King: I am getting more and more annoyed at these authors.

Slave: I see that!

K: How can they claim that national identity does not exist! Without it, we’ll all be just humans! What are we going to be teaching our children?

S: You are right, Your Majesty. I believe that is precisely what they are saying. That this business of identity is not only an invention, but it is a rather bad invention because it poisons future generations to buy into the idea of having something that is totally a fiction!

K: ‘Poison’? That’s a strong word, slave. So, are they saying we should be abandoning the use of identity totally? And who are we supposed to be without an identity?



- S: That is quite an interesting question Your Majesty. What if we imagined a living without these claims about having *this* identity and *that* identity? I think you shouldn't worry though, because I am afraid it'll take quite some time before such a revolution takes place!
- K: You should be very careful my dear slave when you talk about revolution in the presence of your King!
- S: Be sure I meant revolution in the original Latin sense (Latin *revolvere* 'turn, roll back'), which has nothing to do with violence. If you follow the authors' argument, it seems as if the evolution of word meanings in the West is the one that has brought about revolution in the violent sense. Self, individual and identity in their present sense are all modern, too modern at times, and they all in their new meanings hide the power that was before apparent. The authors seem to want to 'roll back' these word meanings, hence the word 'revolution' I used.

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