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Identity construction

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Abstract

Theories of identity construction challenge conventional models of the person as a bounded or monadic individual with a fixed or essential identity, assuming instead a fragmented, incomplete social subject. Identities are presumed to be multiple, complex, and situated. All identities are social, including those personal identities which are experienced as unique ('who I am'). The construction of 'other' identities is part of the processes through which social divisions and inequalities are established and reinforced. Analyses explore the processes through which identities are constructed, claimed and performed, and also the intersection of conventional identity categories. Relevant methodological debates include the status of language data, as truth or interpretation, and the relationship of the researcher to participants and talk data, as observer or insider interpreter.

Main text

Identity is often introduced as a concept which assumes both sameness and difference, in that it categorises people on the basis of their commonalities but ultimately references personal uniqueness (of the kind which is the presumed object of 'identity theft', for example). It might seem logical to distinguish social from personal identities, defining social identities as those which are collective and external, ascribed, for instance, on the basis of people's appearance or roles, in contrast to personal identities as individual and 'felt' or experienced. However, the premise that people are social subjects presumes that all identities are ultimately social and that the experience of 'who I am', sometimes referred to as 'subjectivity', is itself socially produced. Recent theorisations of the social subject propose that the sense of being a unique individual is enhanced by a contemporary requirement to undertake the construction of identity as a personal project, and to

discipline and govern oneself in pursuit of ideals which ultimately serve the larger political and economic interests of neoliberalism. Identity construction is therefore linked to subjectification and governmentality.

Theories of construction presume that identity is produced, and changed, at least in part by a person's interactional, situational, sociohistoric, and cultural contexts. The corollaries of this premise are that identities are necessarily multiple or fluid or both, to accommodate the variety of possible contexts, and also that there is some process, often not explored or fully explicated, by which the social becomes not only uniquely individual but also deeply personal. Construction therefore challenges universal, ahistorical accounts of fixed or essential identities which centre on a bounded or monadic individual. It also draws attention to the links between identities, inequalities, and the workings of power in contemporary society.

Conventional categories of identity, such as gender, age, class, nationality, race and ethnicity, remain important foci in discussions of construction. However, the inadequacy of these categories as bounded descriptors is generally acknowledged and an investigation of identities in context is likely to explore how multiple categories intersect, as in Robert Young's UK-based research on the age-linked (young), gendered (male), classed (working class) identities of 'Neds' and 'Chavs' (Young, 2012). The notion that identities are constructed in language raises further issues, including in relation to the researcher's status and the status of language data as either truth or interpretation. The remainder of this entry is organised into three main sections which discuss the construction of the identities of others, the construction of self or 'own' identities, and some of the issues and problems which identity construction raises for an academic researcher.

The construction of 'other' identities

The notion that identities are constructed underpins varied theoretical and methodological approaches. It continues to be important for social researchers because the construction of identities is central to the creation and perpetuation of divisions of difference and inequality in society. Research on identity construction is likely to investigate the processes by which some people come to be seen as 'others' to the taken-for-granted and normal, and also the practices through which such representations of particular groups or categories of people are communicated, contested and reinforced. These research foci are seldom neatly separated. They may be approached through several avenues, broadly characterised here as resources, sites, and practices.

The social resources available for the construction of representations have been variously defined and named, for instance, as 'discourses', 'interpretative repertoires' and 'narratives'. They are usually taken to include the meanings, accrued associations, recognisable logics and previous constructions which pre-exist and enable any construction of identity in language. As an example, a construction of a national identity invokes the general meanings of nation, national community and territory, and certain commonsense logics about nations, such as that a particular national identity is somehow given by shared history and experience, and is distinguishable from other national and state identities. In addition, the construction is likely to draw on the associations of geography, relative global importance, lifestyle – the possible list is almost endless – which are specific to a named nation, and the historical narratives which contribute to understandings of the nation's proper territory and culture and set significant dates of national unity to be commemorated, such as victories and the date of the nation's birth or official formation. The construction of the nation's identity in turn has implications for the identities of the people who belong to the nation, for their view of themselves and the ways they are seen by others.

The functions and implications of an identity construction need to be understood in context, including the temporal context. For example, genealogical studies explore the historical basis of representations and the ways that the resources on which they draw have accrued over time. Other studies may aim to expose shifts in contemporary representations. An important example is the ongoing re-constructions of racial or ethnic difference in novel terms, for instance, as based in 'culture' rather than biology (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The significance of the shifts is that the alternative representations reinforce existing negative identities without overtly infringing the social prohibitions against explicitly 'biased, prejudiced and racist' talk which is now generally accepted to be 'inconsistent with the general values of tolerance' (van Dijk, 1992, p.115). The changing identity constructions therefore evidence the unacknowledged continuity of old inequalities into new situations.

A site of identity construction may be associated with specific functions and conventions. The site's importance follows from its location with institutional, legal, technological, and other frameworks through which power operates in society, possibly in ways which are not usually recognised. These frameworks correspond broadly to the 'discursive formations' described by Michel Foucault. For example, political speeches, news reports and football fan forums online all have their own language conventions and ostensible purposes and have also been studied as the sites of communications in

which national identities are constructed and contested. The most minimal site for identity construction is probably a specific location within a framework, such as that of a role or relational position which someone can be addressed as or speak from. Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990) use the terms 'positions', or 'positioning' to refer to such identities. Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe (2006) extend Davies and Harré's definition and focus it on self or 'own' identities (discussed in the next section), saying: "'Positioning' refers to the process through which speakers adopt, resist and offer 'subject positions' that are made available in 'master narratives' or 'discourses'" (p.139).

An investigation of constructions of identity will also consider practices. There are again many possibilities and the focus will depend partly on the disciplinary specialisation of the researcher. One type of practice is the micro-practices of language, such as the active or passive grammatical constructions which emphasise either the agent or the outcome of actions, as in the alternative formulations of 'Police shot a protester' and 'A protester was shot'. In that example, the first formulation presents the police as responsible for the shooting and therefore culpable, at least potentially, whereas in the second formulation the only specified person is the protester, which implies that the shooting was by an unknown person (perhaps even another protester?). The second formulation also centres the incident on the victim, carrying a potential further implication that the relevant issue was the victim's identity and behaviour, as if protesting might be expected to attract a violent response. The alternative formulations therefore construct different identities for both protester and police. Moreover, especially considered within the larger context of, say, news reports, the alternatives would carry subtle political meanings, first, by implying criticism of either the police or the protestor, second, by conveying approval, or not, of protesting, and ultimately, by invoking the different priorities of free speech and public order. An analysis of this kind therefore moves from the details of the language practice to the larger implications which are given in part by the site of the identity construction.

Another type of practice is the general social actions or functions accomplished in language, such as announcing or questioning, and a third is the functions associated with larger frameworks, such as the ratifying of a treaty or the issuing of a press release. An example which illustrates both these types of practice appears in the work of Jovan Byford (2006, discussed in Taylor, 2013). His research explored how the celebration of a historical figure, in various forms of public document and script, became part of the political and ideological process of establishing a new national identity which excluded particular racial and ethnic groups. Among the relevant practices were the language used,

the larger functions of celebrating, publicising and so on, and practices linked to politics, such as speech-making. The identity construction therefore involved different types or levels of practices.

There is a lay assumption that a language is a discrete stable system of vocabulary and grammar. However, sociolinguists, among others, emphasise how language use is always shaped to purpose and context, and also how any named language is a field of constantly evolving variants specific to particular groups. The use of such variants can potentially function as part of the performance of a language user's own identity, and as evidence of identity and difference which can be employed against others. For example, differences of pronunciation and grammar distinguish the dialects of different regions of a country and also tend to carry classed associations, so that the dialect of the metropolis or centre (perhaps the capital city or the most prosperous part) is likely to be linked to an identity of intellectual, educational or social superiority. It may be the preferred dialect for certain occupations, like a politician or high profile television journalist, disadvantaging people with a different dialect who claim a similar identity and aspire to associated jobs and positions.

A further issue concerns the status of language. One argument, strongly associated with the named approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Van Dijk 1998), is that language use encompasses a discrete and distinctive set of social practices within social contexts. Following from this, researchers might analyse examples of language, spoken or written, from business meetings, news reports, online forums or official documents, to list just a few of the possibilities. The assumption is that this study of language is relevant in itself because of its functions in context.

A different argument, associated with critical discursive psychology and also the study of identity construction in sociology more generally, is that language use is just one among many social practices through which meanings are constituted and contested. An example might be that the language of a national identity is part of a continuum of meaningful practices through which a nation is constructed and the construction maintained or reinforced. The continuum might include the practices through which the boundary of a contested territory is mapped, legalised, marked, defended, challenged and physically reinforced, for instance, with a wall. If the second argument is accepted, then the data which provide evidence of identity construction can therefore go beyond language to include images, observations and any other evidence of component elements of the discursive formation. Alternatively, language use might be studied because it is assumed to exemplify the continuum, like a window onto the whole formation.

The construction of self identity

The previous section outlined some of the theories, general approaches and issues relevant to research into the construction of the identities of others. This section will explore the notion that people construct their own identities, and consider some implications.

One approach to the investigation of identities in talk is to analyse what someone says, or (less commonly) writes, as evidence of a persisting and relatively stable identity. The underlying assumption, which is not always made explicit, is that the fixed or essential identity of 'who I am' is being voiced so that a participant's talk can be heard or read as direct evidence of their identity, as its expression or reliable reflection. However, this assumption that talk mirrors an inner reality is a denial of the situated and constitutive nature of language. This point can be illustrated with reference to gender identities.

To assume that a gendered person, say, a woman, speaks as a woman returns to the assumption of an essential identity which pre-exists its expression in talk, perhaps because its basis is biological. Logically, this assumption conflicts with the notion that gendered identities are constructed and social. A partial resolution of the conflict, common in large scale qualitative research projects such as ethnographies, is to assume that the talk is the expression of an identity which has already been constituted in life practices and is now being expressed in talk. However, this is still problematic. First, it does not acknowledge that talk is situated and varies with the occasion, interaction, immediate conversational context, and so on. People's accounts of themselves and the ways that they construct their identities in talk are not consistent so it is not logical to treat a single instance of talk as evidence of an enduring identity.

A second problem is that the assumption that identity is expressed in talk does not take account of how the talk itself is shaped by resources, such as conventions and scripts. An example occurs with some of the recent research in which women, and especially young women, have been found to describe themselves and their life prospects in ways which emphasise individual capacity and choice. In an early example, Valerine Walkerdine (2003) described a secretary who forces herself to work harder and harder, interpreting her difficulties with an ever-increasing workload in individual terms ('her failure, her pathology or her standards', p.240). Walkerdine suggests that this woman's construction of her identity evidences a contemporary social emphasis on individual achievement and upward mobility, rather than alternative discourse which might have prevailed in another

context and time, of exploitation and the disadvantage of certain collective class positions. Such individualistic talk, sometimes referred to as entrepreneurial, is consistent with the values of neoliberalism. Analytically, however, there is a need to distinguish between the talk as evidence that young women and their lives have indeed become more individually focussed and entrepreneurial, or the alternative argument that the change is not in the young women but in the new conventions for presenting themselves positively. The second assumption opens the possibility that attempting to claim and perform the currently valued identity of independent individuality and capacity, including through their talk, involves a denial of continuing structural inequalities, with further consequences for the young woman herself.

The latter position is consistent with a different approach which assumes that talk is one of the practices through which gender (or another identity) is claimed, constructed and performed, necessarily with reference to prevailing meanings in context. The concept of performance, sometimes also referred to as performativity, has already been briefly referred to. It is now associated widely used and carries somewhat conflicting associations from the work of different theorists. Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical focus emphasises the function of (talk as) performance for self-presentation. However, his work can be criticised for implying that an already intact subject pre-exists the performance, and therefore for referring to a monadic subject. In contrast, Judith Butler (1990) argues that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (p.33) and she warns against the assumption that there is some separate gender identity which is being expressed in the performance. Instead, she proposes a more complex, almost dialectical performance which involves "a stylized repetition of acts" (p.179), constrained by existing meanings and systems of power. The performance of gender involves "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulations of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (p.173). However there is space and potential within the imperfect repetitions for gender to change and for performance even to subvert the regulations and obligatory frame which defines it.

The concept of positioning reduces identity construction to the taking up of a position in an ongoing interaction, as both a speaking position and a point of view with associated interests. It is a rich analytic concept since it exposes the shifting relationships and power play as positions change within interactions, and draws attention to the situated and multiple nature of social identities. This is consistent with the poststructuralist notion of a fragmented self dispersed across contexts which is

of course considerably at odds with the coherence and continuity of the self as commonly understood and experienced.

This conflict has been explored in social psychology. Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000) have criticised approaches to identity construction associated with discursive psychology and discourse analysis for theorising a person who lacks continuity, and also for failing to account for the differing emotional loading or attachment experienced in relation to multiple available identities. Hollway and Jefferson argue that the problems are satisfactorily addressed through reference to psychoanalytic theories. They have developed a research approach which employs psychoanalytically-informed techniques to explore the continuity given by “a biographically unique ‘reality’” (p.38), contained in the psyche. They also employ the concept of investment to explain a person’s unequal attachments to the various identity positions made available by discourses as “systems of meaning which are a product of the social world” (p.24).

Other social psychologists have proposed that continuity and emotional or affective loading are explainable in discursive terms. Wetherell (2003) suggests that individual patterns of interactional responses are established in childhood. These ways of interacting or “discursive styles or routines” become established as part of a “personal order” which persists and characterises a personal identity. Wetherell therefore explains the continuity of identity in terms of people’s (discursive) actions, without reinstating the kind of fixed or essential identity which is associated with a monadic individual. Somewhat differently, Stephanie Taylor (2010) suggests that the continuity comes from the social resources encountered in childhood. These subsequently accrue to provide a unique pool of personal resources which are emotionally coloured by experience and association, and shape subsequent interpretations. In addition, social expectation encourages consistencies in successive presentations of personal identity and this is promoted through resort to the same resource pool, itself continually supplemented by each account of ‘who I am’ which can be re-versioned for a future telling. This is a narrative-discursive account of continuity in the personal identities people construct for themselves.

Research issues around identity construction

The previous sections have discussed identity construction in relation, first, to other people’s identities, and then to self or ‘own’ identities. The entry has referred to theorists and issues associated with different disciplines including sociology, sociolinguistics, social psychology, and

cultural studies (Judith Butler's work), some of which is primarily theoretical and some more concerned with methodology and empirical research. This section will extend the discussion of problems or issues around identity construction.

One tradition with a strong methodological element is that of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis which originated in sociology and now dominates the area of psychology known as discursive psychology. Academics studying the construction of identity in this tradition have drawn attention to a particular set of issues around the relevance or salience of identities. Emanuel Schegloff (1997), for instance, has argued that researchers tend to impose their interests on participants, assuming, for example, that talk and interactions are 'about' the identity of interest to the researcher, such as, gender, even though the participants may be constructing and orienting to different identities. The corrective is supposedly to look to follow the participants' own focus, reading off the salient identity through a close technical analysis of their talk and interaction. Other academics suggest this resort to the 'truth' of the data is not viable, at least for gender because of the pervasiveness of this identity; participants will always interact as gendered beings, albeit in intersection with other identities (an example might be a gendered, raced, classed, professional identity) so gender will always be salient. A further argument is that the claim to be able to detect the relevant orientation is inconsistent with the complexity of social contexts, and of people as socially constituted, since it does not allow that multiple identities might be in play simultaneously.

Despite these challenges, the conversation analytic position usefully draws attention to two further questions, namely, the relevance of standard categories of identities for participants themselves, and the possibility that such categories may not be the relevant identities for any particular study or situation. For instance, a researcher will need to consider why it is appropriate to study national identities rather than, say, regional or transnational identities or alternative identities which refer to group, locality, and legal status. Of course in practical terms, the researcher's choices may not be so clear-cut and it is also likely that any particular identity category will provide a suitable entry point for further exploration, for instance, around the intersections of categories, such as the gendered and racialised nature of class identities, or the class associations of particular national identities. It is also possible that wholly new identities have been constructed, perhaps centred on the rejection of a conventional category, as with identities of sexual practice and preference (bi-, non-monogamous) which are constructed partly through contrast with and the rejection of more conventional identities.

A further set of issues around identity construction concerns the status of language as truth or interpretation. As already discussed, the conversation analytic tradition claims that its findings have the status of discovered truth. The assumption is that the researcher is not presenting her or his own interpretations but describing participants' talk as an observable interaction. The approach refers to positioning and co-construction of identities but avoids speculation about people's mental states, such as how they might intend to present themselves.

Many other researchers reject truth claims. For social psychologists, a key source was a 1985 article in which Kenneth Gergen argued against cognitive psychological approaches which claim 'objective knowledge of the world' (Gergen, 1985, p.269). Gergen proposed instead that the terms in which we understand the world and ourselves are 'social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people' (p.267) and 'human meaning systems' (p.270). What is and can be known is therefore an interpretation specific to its social context; other people, elsewhere (whether the distance is geographic, cultural or temporal) might understand themselves and their world rather differently. This position is consistent with the work of Michel Foucault which emphasises not only the situated nature of 'truths' but their connection to power, including the power of deciding what the truth is. This is of course the power of the scientist, including the social scientist and psychologist. Nonetheless, the implications of these ideas are that the researcher is within and subject to the knowledge and value system which is being investigated, reducing the possibility that the system can be evaluated or criticised.

Many researchers on identity construction would modify this position. They would acknowledge themselves to be socially located and therefore within the social context of meanings and practices which is being studied; indeed, they might argue that this insider position is to some extent necessary, enabling the language researcher, for example, to recognise the associations and connections which are given by the commonsense of a society. However, they would reject that they are in the paradoxical position of attempting to expose taking-for-granted meanings and recognise truths which as social insiders they could be presumed to accept as self-evident. The paradox is resolved through the notion of reflexivity. This suggests that the researcher is able to take both an insider and outsider position by recognising how society acts on them and they, in turn, act upon and influence the social situation they occupy, including the research situation. There is generally some further assumption that such recognition can be aided by rigour and system within the research process, including the analytic process: a conscientious researcher can enhance their

awareness of their own role and of regularities within the data which might prompt further investigation. Nonetheless, the final assumption is still that research is an act of interpretation.

See also: conversation analysis, overview; Critical discourse analysis; cultural discourse analysis; discourse analysis; discursive psychology.

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