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Identity

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Identity

Introduction

Discussions of identity are complicated by the many uses of the term (see Jenkins, 1996). It is cited politically, in contests around recognition, rights and inclusion, as in the claims of a minority group against the state and larger society. It is also used personally as a reference which approximates to the self, for example, in the notion of an 'identity crisis'.

Academically, identity generally implies a sameness and felt connection between the individual person and some wider collective or group, and in both lay and academic uses, references to identity often serve an explanatory purpose: a person's behaviour or feelings or a likely life course may be attributed to their belonging to a particular identity category.

The problematization of recognised identity categories is central to research on gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, among many other examples. Academics are interested in the definitions of specific identities, their origins and their situated and contemporary nature. They investigate the lived and felt, or affective, nature of identity and hence the nature of the person, and the extent to which 'who I am' is chosen or given. Investigations of the connection, or disconnection, between self-descriptions and the identities attributed by others therefore link to classic social and philosophical debates, around voluntarism and determinism, structure and agency.

Definition

Identity refers to a person's social group or category which is assumed to imply connection or sameness, such as gender or sexuality or nationality, or to a larger sense of self ('who I am') to which the specific identity categories are assumed to contribute. Identity therefore raises issues of the connection, or lack of it, between the social identities imposed by others, such as a racial identity, and the personal identity claimed by a person as part of her or his self-identification, and the connections between different categories of identity.

Keywords

Identity, social identity, personal identity, subject, subjectification, salience, investment, affect, situated, multiple, fluid, identity project, practice

History

Historically, the world has been marked by unending struggles around the processes by which people are named and categorised, alternative identity claims are denied and some voices within society are silenced, and the counter-processes of resistance, claims and assertions of presence and voice, and demands for rights, including the right to self-definition. Such struggles have implications for all of our lives. They often involve claims based in reductive explanations in which certain identities are presented, whether positively or negatively, as essential and unchanging. Yet, at the same time, the contests themselves evidence the opposite, that identities are, inevitably, situated, constructed and (to some extent) fluid.

The political implications of identity led to identity becoming a major academic concern after the Second World War. Some of the most important psychology work on identity – notably, Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (S.I.T) – developed as an attempt to understand the persecution of Jewish people and other groups. The special contribution of S.I.T. is the connections it proposes between personal and social identities. The theory continues to be highly influential in areas which are major concerns for critical psychology, for example, in research on prejudice and racism, including in its further developments, such as Michael Billig's discussion of the emotional aspects of racism (Billig, 2002).

Identity as a topic for investigation also acquired new importance as a result of post-Marxist theorising which rejected purely economic accounts of social divisions. This rejection has several implications for academics. One is that class, as a position within a larger economic structure, is no longer accepted as the primary or overriding categorisation in terms of which other divisions, such as race, can be explained. Another is that 'culture', understood broadly, acquires a new importance in defining categories, including class and race, and therefore becomes an important focus of research, and a third is that explanations are needed for how identities are both conferred, externally, and adopted and 'internalised' by an individual. The latter point has driven theorisations of the identity of a contemporary subject, specific to her or his context (in contrast to the universal person or subject discussed by many psychology theories). Sociologists and social theorists have considered the nature of the person located in the sociohistoric contexts of late modernity (Anthony Giddens), liquid modernity (Zygmunt Bauman), advanced capitalism and liberal democracies (Nikolas Rose). Rose's work (e.g. Rose, 1989) is associated with theories of governmentality. He argues that psychology itself and its related specialisms, like psychotherapy, which he groups as 'the psy disciplines', have contributed to the processes by which the contemporary person disciplines and shapes her- or himself to serve larger social interests.

Traditional debates

The study of identity raises some of the traditional problems and debates of social theory and philosophy, around determinism and voluntarism, structure and agency. To what extent are people unique individuals and how far do they resemble others? Are they free to choose who they want to be and make themselves in an individual project of identity construction (a notion which is widely associated with the work of the sociologist Anthony Giddens, e.g. Giddens, 1991), or are they predominantly the products of their societies and more immediate contexts, their identities conferred and limited, for example, by their positions in a class structure?

These questions invoke other issues, around the nature of the person. Is identity a matter of who people are or what they do? Should it be conceptualised in terms of fixed attributes or traits, or ongoing social processes and everyday life practices? And what is the relative importance of the many possible identities which can be attached to any one person? Why is that some imposed, or external identities, are easily changed while others seem to become internalised or 'owned', apparently carrying enormous emotional investment or affective loading?

Discussions of the fixity, or otherwise, of identities and the limits of their fluidity have led to different accounts of sources of closure, including embodiment, investment and biography, including in narrative psychology. These questions also introduce empirical issues, for example, around appropriate methods for investigating identity.

Critical debates

Identity is an important concern for critical psychologists because of the connection between identities and power. The exercise, denial and re-assertion of power inevitably involves contests around identity. However, an important challenge to theorists of identity, including critical theorists, arose from feminist politics in the late 1960s and 1970s. The general issue was whether an identity as a woman encompasses and overrides other identities as a basis for political mobilization, or whether a global feminist movement must inevitably divide because for many women gender difference is less relevant to their identities than the divisions between rich and poor, global North and South, or differences of race, ethnicity and religion.

For academics, these feminist debates raise questions, first, about the nature of an identity as a woman. Is it biological or social or both, and if both what is the relationship between the two aspects? Second, the debates draw attention to the problem of the salience of different identities and also the relevance of discrete identity categories: when is an identity as a woman important compared to other identities, and can it be separated off? Perhaps, instead, the relevant category will always be complex, for example, as a woman professional of a certain age, and racial and ethnic categorisation. Are the standard academic and social research categories such as gender, nationality etc relevant at all, or are they rather empty labels which obscure the uniquely complex divisions functioning in any real life situation? One relatively recent development in this area is theories of intersectionality (e.g. Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). Another is work in discursive psychology which emphasises the situated and functional nature of identity claims (e.g. Stokoe, 2010).

Nikolas Rose's work on the 'psy' disciplines is particularly relevant to critical psychologists concerned about both institutional and informal exploitations of the authority of psychology. This has also informed arguments around, for example, 'psychologization' as an aspect of contemporary gender identities, in the work of Valerie Walkerdine (e.g. Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010).

Post-structuralism and other theoretical developments from the 1970s and 80s also emphasised the situated, rather than universal, nature of identities and the extent to which they are fixed. For example, Judith Butler's work on gender introduced the notion of identity as performative (Butler, 2010). This has similarities to the ethnomethodological emphasis on practice which has been developed in discursive psychology (see entry). Both consider practice or performance as constitutive rather than as the actions of already constituted persons. This idea is developed further in process theories, for example, around affect (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Wetherell, 2012)

International Relevance

Identity remains a widely used term in international academic debates in many disciplines, including psychology, for the reasons already outlined. The political importance attached to particular categories of identity mean that the term and various conceptualisations of it will always be relevant to social psychology research on, for example, nationality, gender, sexuality, age group (e.g. in gerontology studies) and race and ethnicity.

Practice relevance

Identity will probably remain a useful starting point for empirical researchers because of its uses outside academia and its connections to political debate and struggle. In addition, new situations and practices are almost inevitably explored in terms of potential identities, such as those made available or taken up in online interactions. However, the traditional and critical debates around identity suggest that researchers will need to explore their conceptualisation of the term and they may find themselves seeking other, more precise terms to theorise their findings. Research often focuses on identities in context which raises further questions, such as the salience of particular identities and the problem of distorting their importance as a result of the research process, for example, by asking people to reflect on their own gender or sexual or national identities.

Future Directions

A key issue for the future will be the continuing utility of identity as a term and concept. Its breadth of reference and non-academic uses have perhaps reduced its usefulness for academics as a theoretical concept. In one view, particularly common in the UK, it is an imprecise synonym for 'subjectivity' although there are also arguments that that term has problematic associations, for example, that it reinstates 'internal' and fixed associations (Wetherell, 2008) and that it is over-simple, implying total and coherent regulation and loss of agency rather than a more complex social subject (Burkitt 2008; Taylor & Littleton, 2012). The issues more conventionally associated with identity have more recently been claimed by psychosocial researchers, for example, in discussions of the subject, and, particularly in applied fields, by researchers studying governmentality.

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Online resources

The Identities and Social Action programme <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/identities/>
Social Identity Theory <http://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html>
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identity_\(social_science\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identity_(social_science))

A list of keywords

Identity
social identity
personal identity
subject
subjectivity
subjectification
salience
investment
affect
situated
multiple
fluid
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practice
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A list of all the names mentioned

Bansel, Peter

Bauman, Zygmunt

Billig, Michael

Burkitt, Ian

Butler, Judith

Giddens, Anthony

Jenkins, Richard

Littleton, Karen

Pattynama, Pamela

Phoenix, Ann

Rose, Nikolas

Stokoe, Elizabeth

Tajfel, Henri

Talpade Mohanty, Chandra

Taylor, Stephanie

Walkerdine, Valerie

Wetherell, Margaret