
Introduction
From anthropology to women’s studies, identity is one of the most widely studied subjects across social science literature, resulting in its description as both “elusive and ubiquitous” (Gleason, 1983). The body of literature on identity is varied in both approach and emphasis. Identity researchers and theorists focus on personal identities, which highlight the distinctiveness of the individual, and social identities, which emphasize common group identities (e.g., gender), relationships (e.g., parent), or social roles (e.g., activist).

Identity offers a way of thinking about the links between the personal and the social; that is, how the psychological and social aspects of the self are tied together to create a self-concept (Woodward, 2002). Identity can be seen as both a psychological and political construct, people invest in their identities and often are driven by their identities, but these identities are always socially located (Allahar, 2001). Depending upon historical and cultural values and norms, certain identities are valued more at any given time in comparison to others (Allahar, 2001). In addition, identities are supported and sustained through social networks and relationships, leading to potential disagreements regarding the criteria that different parties will use to define and describe certain identities (Allahar, 2001).

Social science researchers empirically examine the relationship between the importance, salience, or centrality of a particular identity and the various emotions, cognitions, and behaviors of people with those identities (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). For example, people’s behavior in certain social situations is often predicated on whether they see themselves as a prototypical member of the group (Turner, 1985) or whether they feel a sense of belonging (Tropp & Wright 2001), commitment (Tyler & Blader, 2001), or connection between other group members and themselves (Gaertner & Schopler, 1998). Attention is often paid to individual differences, such as level of self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) and sensitivity to rejection (Ayduk, Mendoza-Denton, Mischel, Downey, Peake, & Rodriguez, 2000).

Definition
Collective identity encompasses both an individuals’ self-definition and affiliation with specific groups or roles. While personal identity can be defined as a subjective sense of self based on unique personal characteristics, collective identity refers to the way that people define themselves in relation to others and the outside world, i.e., identities that are socially influenced (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). The term collective identity is gaining popularity as a distinct term describing affiliation and a sense of connectedness to a particular social group.

Keywords
Personal identity, social identity, collective identity, multiple identities, identity theory

Traditional Debates
Identity theory has been influenced by early work of William James (1890) and Charles Horton Cooley (1902). James introduced the concept of the self as subject (i.e., the “I”) and the self as
subject (i.e., the “Me”), a concept further explored by George Herbert Mead (1934). Cooley (1902) expanded upon the self as subject in his conceptualization of reflected appraisals (i.e., the looking glass self), which refers to the way that identity is developed and guided by the perceptions of others. The process of becoming aware of one’s self through reflected appraisals is a core assumption in symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionists refer to identity as the meanings or labels that one attributes to the self (Burke & Tully, 1977) and the expectations for behavior tied to those meanings and labels (Mead, 1934).

In contrast to the symbolic interactionist approach is Turner and colleagues’ Self-Categorization Theory and Social Identity Theory (Turner, 1985). This theoretical approach asserts that the self emerges from the cognitive process of engaging in social comparisons (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). According to Self-Categorization Theory, people categorize themselves in terms of “we”; therefore, social identity is more salient than personal identity in intergroup contexts, when people focus on outgroup distinctiveness and ingroup similarity (Hogg & Turner, 1987). Social Identity Theory (SIT) was initially developed as a theory of intergroup dynamics, describing how people conceive of the status of specific groups, the legitimacy and stability of status relations, and the permeability of intergroup boundaries (Hogg & Abrams, 2001). SIT postulates that social relationships are an important component of the self-concept, that people are motivated to feel good about themselves, and that people feel better about themselves when they believe that their ingroup is somehow superior to the groups to which they do not belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to SIT, the need for self-enhancement drives people to proactively present themselves and their connections to specific social identities differently depending upon the social context (Brown, 1998). Based on the individual’s evaluation of status between groups, SIT reasons that group members will adopt the appropriate behaviors to enhance well-being (Brown, 1998). These behaviors might include disidentification with the group (e.g., attempting to pass into a higher status group), creative ways of reevaluating one’s own group (i.e., social creativity theory), and direct intergroup competition to establish a new status structure (e.g., collective action; Hogg & Abrams, 2001).

While some identity researchers are interested in the consequences of having a particular identity, there are many that are interested in identity development. In Erik Erikson’s (1963) theory of psychosocial development, he describes the age of adolescence as one that is focused on achieving a strong sense of self, when one knows where he or she stands, accepts him or herself, and attempts to continue growing and changing. James Marcia (1966) operationalized Erikson’s theory of identity development, concluding that the movement through stages and the negotiation of the identity crisis is accomplished through four identity statuses: diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and achievement. Contemporary research continues to examine the stages of development, focusing on specific collective identities such as feminist identity development (Roush & Downing, 1985), homosexual identity development (Troiden, 1989), and ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1982).

Critical Debates

Collective identities are influenced by the political contexts in which they develop (Callero, 2003). Lorde (1984) asserts that “in a society where good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systemized...
oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior” (p. 114). Based on the fact that certain social groups are stigmatized and devalued (Goffman, 1963), collective identities are often developed in opposition to mainstream group identities. Social philosophers and theorists argue that identity development often depends upon “recognition of self through a recognition of and differentiation from others” (Leach & Brown, 1999, p. 768). The notion of recognition can be problematic because it often reifies the existing social ideology (Fraser, 1996). Acknowledging the importance of societal reactions for feelings of personal worth, scholars have become increasingly interested in the experiences and behaviors of individuals with stigmatized collective identities (Heatherton, Kleck, Hebl, & Hull, 2000).

There are two opposing viewpoints within the identity literature: one that emphasizes the rigidity of social categories (i.e., essentialist approach), while the other emphasizes the fluidity of social categories (i.e., social constructionist approach). The social constructionist approach to identity emphasizes historical and cultural basis for the generation of identity categories (e.g., Omi & Winant, 1994). Such an approach reveals that social, collective, and group-based identities are dynamic and fluid and do not represent any real categories of people (Esterberg, 1997). Critiques of social constructionism claim that this approach for failing to recognize the way that identities play a role in people’s everyday lives. Empirical evidence reveals that people see themselves within actual social categories. In fact, collective action aimed at social change cannot occur without people first mobilizing around a shared identity (Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990).

Most of the research in the area of identity has been conducted with one particular identity at a time; however, there is a growing body of research examining the intersections of multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1989) or a person’s choice to identify with one particular identity over another (e.g., Pronin, Steele, & Ross, 2002). In an effort to provide a better understanding of the often overlapping, yet distinctly termed, concepts in identity theory, contemporary researchers are developing new frameworks for studying identity (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004).

References


Online Resources


