"WHO AM I?" - IDENTITY AS A REFLECTION OF MODERN TIMES

TATIANA HRIVÍKOVÁ[1]

Summary

The paper presents a survey of the changing perception of the concept of identity from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives. First several definitions of the term are discussed and their view of identity as either a proof of uniqueness or a result of a thorough self-enquiry. Further the diachronic approach to identity reveals the main schools of thought that influenced the perception of identity in history and literary examples are used to explain their impact. The synchronic approach focuses on two main research directions; the social-psychological one considering identity as a set of gradual developmental stages, and communication approach where the consequences of various identities either avowed or ascribed are studied and their display in the process of communication. Finally, the theory of roles relevant for both social psychology and communication theory is discussed with reference to identity choice.

Key words
communication theory, diachronic approach, identity, identity dimensions, social psychology, synchronic approach,

Összefoglalás

A tanulmány az identitás fogalmának változásait mutatja be szinkronikus és diakronikus szempontokból. Először a fogalom definiálására kerül sor, majd bemutatom az identitás fogalmának diakron megközelítési módjait, azokat az elméleteket, amelyek feltárják a történeti fogalomértelmezéseket és ezeknek az irodalomban is megjelenő hatását. A szinkron megközelítésnek két kutatási iránya lehetséges: a szociálpszichológiai irányzat az identitást fokozatos fejlődési szintekként magyarázza, a kommunikációs alapú irány a kommunikációban betöltött helyét vizsgálja. Végül a szociálpszichológiában és a kommunikáció-elméletben is jeletős szerep-elméletetnek az identitás-választásra kifejtett hatását elemzem.

Kulcsszavak
kommunikációs elmélet, időrendszeres szemlélet, identitás, az identitás dimenziói, szociál- pszichológia, szinkronikus szemlélet

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[1] associate professor, deputy dean, University of Economics in Bratislava, e-mail: tatiana.hrivikova@euba.sk

Introduction

The aim of the paper is to tackle the concept of identity from various perspectives illustrating the complexity of its content. Simultaneously, we intend to point out the consequences caused by its different perception and interpretation under the changing influence of various schools of thought up to the 21st century. The method of empirical study and comparative literary research has been implemented for collecting the presented findings.

The question posed in the title -"Who am I?" is simple though the answer is never so. The soul-searching question may reveal who an individual believes he/she is and where his/her loyalties rest. Usually, the self-evaluation of a person is the result of a combination of factors; initially it is formed under the influence of one's immediate family, later by an extended circle of friends, acquaintances, teachers, schoolmates, colleagues and even adversaries. The whole society or culture that the individual belongs to influences the opinions and beliefs that one embraces due to particular historical developments of the culture and specific status it assigns to various roles in life.

Definitions of identity

To approach the topic of identity we need to begin with an introductory clarification of the key term 'identity' and present its definition. There are numerous definitions proving the relevance of the issue that describe the term from various angles. The most general ones can be found in dictionaries, e.g.: "qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person different from others" (Merriam-Webster 2008). The definition stresses the specific features of an individual, setting him/her apart from any other. The identity is viewed and evaluated by other observers different from the subject under observation.

On the other hand, various researchers developed their own definitions expressing a specific understanding of the concept. Psychologists Leary and Tangney define identity as "a person's awareness of self" (Leary 2003) while Tajfel as a sociologist defined it as a construct expressing "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Robinson 1996, 76). Both definitions view identity as a conscious self-study and self-evaluation. They differ from the first, dictionary definition by changing the observer and actually uniting him/her with the observed one but they also differ from each other; while Leary and Tangney's definition expresses a conscious self-study and stock-taking of various existing features, the definition proposed by Tajfel suggests an evaluative approach where the rational and emotional powers are equally involved in the process. According to our interpretation he actually suggests a subjective qualitative and quantitative evaluation of one's own identity.

The high number of existing varieties of definitions proves that the research of identity is considered important for a number of reasons. Firstly, a person's identity is the basis of one's self-confidence and consequently influences his/her life-style, success and degree of satisfaction. At the same time it has a profound impact on the decisions, acts and way of communication of individuals. Secondly, understanding one's own identity enables people to judge and estimate the identities of others with positive consequences for the development of society and peaceful co-existence. Finally, proper understanding of others' identities facilitates the choice of adequate communication strategies and enables increased understanding and achievement of one's communicative goals.

Diachronic approach

As we stated in the introductory part of the paper, we approach the concept of identity from various perspectives and the first one is a survey of diachronic development of views and the changing attitude towards identity. The research has recorded several changes in the

interpretation of the concept under the influence of various philosophical schools. Up to the 90s the dominant essentialist view on identity labelled it as a fixed one. It was based on the idea of a person as a unified individual capable to reason, act and feel. A conviction ruled that the inner core obtained by birth never changed; the person grew with it and remained essentially the same from 'cradle to grave'. The essential centre of the self was a person's identity (Hall 2000). Such an approach was rather individualistic and actually denied the influence of the environment on a person's development. The reflection of such opinions on identity can be also demonstrated in some literary works; as an example we may mention the heroes and anti-heroes from various novels of Charles Dickens (Oliver Twist, Uriah Heep, David Coperfield). Whatever their position in life or twist of fate, they remain always the same; inherently good or evil.

A change in perception of identity was noted at the end of the 20th century, when the constructivist approach started to gain support. This trend suggested the complexity of impacts that an individual has to encounter throughout his/her life and the sustained character of that pressure leaves its traces on them. As a consequence the individual is not autonomous but develops in relation with 'significant others' who transmit and mediate their own values, norms of conduct, beliefs and interpretations of meanings creating their particular culture. According to that approach the identity was formed due to permanent contact to the society. The core was still accepted as "the real me, but this was formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the worlds 'outside' and the identities which they offered" (Hall 2000, 597). The result was a picture of identity as a single though complex whole. Accordingly, the mutual predictability of individuals and society was caused by the identity bridging the gap between the two, connecting the inside with the outside world. Again, we can use a literary example to characterise the approach. Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray represents an extreme example of human transformation under the detrimental seduction and influence of his environment. His life without rules, norms and any limits caused his absolute metamorphosis into a heedless monster.

The most recent view on the identity typical for the 21st century seems to make a step further in the sense that it defines a person as owning one complex identity consisting of a set of identities. The previously accepted changing but unified identity is being abandoned and replaced by a different one, perceived as fragmented and including many, often unresolved identities (Scottish vs. British identity). The identity is continuously in the process of transformation according to the situational context. One uses different identities in different situations and there does not seem to be any central 'self'. Passing among various contexts one sheds some identities and picks up others based on our previous experience. The shifting and fragmented character appears to be the most relevant characteristic feature of identity in our times. This is mainly the consequence of globalisation which causes continuous changes in societies and undermines the traditional frameworks which gave stability and anchorage to individuals in the past. The 'crisis of identity' is the consequence of rapid, irreversible changes of the central structures of societies. Modernity as a label expression for our present form of existence is defined not only as the experience of living with extensive, and continuous change, but equally as a highly reflexive form of life in which "cultural practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information" (Giddens 1990, 37) in other words, a constant influx of impulses from other, more dominant cultures cause changes in the receiving cultures. In that sense the modern perception of identity in the 21st century could be described as poststructuralist because it is perceived as a set of multiple identities which are activated in particular contexts. Such an identity can be figuratively compared to a diamond with many facets revealing only those touched by rays of light.

Synchronic approach

Though the diachronic approach proves to be useful in revealing the changes experienced in the perception of identity in history, we move to the more recent researches in the area to reveal the currently relevant issues connected to the concept of identity. Two research perspectives dominate the study of identity since the turn of the century; the social psychological approach and the communication approach (Collier 1994). Social psychology holds that identity is a personal characteristic that affects the self in its relation to society (Collier 1994) (Erikson 1968) (Waterman 1985). Researchers in this approach attempt to find the components of identity and define the stages of its development. For example, Rotheram and Phinney (Rotheram 1987) asserted that e.g. ethnic identity includes several concepts, such as ethnic awareness, ethnic self-identification, ethnic attitudes, and ethnic behaviours. Each of those concepts reflects a different depth of involvement; while awareness stands for the weakest form meaning knowledge without commitment, self-identification is a step forward reflecting mental bond with some degree of involvement. Attitudes take the identity to a further level of commitment with relatively strong emotional involvement but only occasional action and finally, behaviour reflects full acceptance of commitment and demonstrative actions to prove it.

Among the most influential theories concerning identity development in social psychology Erikson's 'Psychosocial identity development theory' and later Marcia's 'Identity status theory' have earned great recognition and followers. Erikson suggested eight stages of development loosely set into certain age ranges but the advancement from one stage to the next is according to him dependent on successful solution of a crisis as a challenge to one's ego and choice between two possible options. The choices of his scale include Trust or Mistrust, Autonomy or Doubt, Initiative or Guilt, Industry or Inferiority, Identity or Role Confusion, Intimacy or Isolation, Generativity or Stagnation and finally Ego integrity or Despair (Erikson 1993). Erikson's work was further developed by James Marcia who focused his attention on the period of adolescence as the key one for identity formation. His 'Identity status theory' was demonstrated in the form of a matrix with four quadrants representing intersections of answers to two crucial questions: "Has a crisis been experienced?" and "Has a commitment been made?" (Marcia 1966, 551 - 558). The suggested options are:

- Identity Achievement – if both questions are answered in affirmative
- Identity Foreclosure – if a commitment has been made without experiencing any crisis
- Identity Moratorium – if a crisis has been experienced without making any commitment
- Identity Diffusion – if both questions are answered in negative

Whereas the social psychological perspective views identity as an ego development process, the communication perspective considers identity as the enactment of cultural communication (Hecht 1993). In other words, an identity is created by the exchange of messages between interactants; it "is the particular character of the group communication system that emerges in the particular situation" (Collier 1994, 39). In this view, communication is the means by which individuals and groups negotiate, co-create, reinforce, and/or challenge identities. Furthermore, identities emerge in communication contexts. When identities are enacted, patterns of communicative conduct become evident, and these patterns may vary according to the culture of the communicator.

According to Cross, an individual's self-concept actually is a combination of personal identity and group identity, which he termed 'reference group orientation' (Cross 1987). The personal identity part of an individual's self-concept deals with characteristics of persons as individuals; these characteristics exist universally in all individuals. "Personal identity variables are the building blocks for all personalities, with culture, class, race, ethnicity, and gender mediating … how much of the variable is present across cultures or different groups of

people" (Cross 1987, 121). In other words, personal identity research examines universal components of human behaviour and analyzes the differences in behaviour in light of their culture. On the other hand, group identity studies the characteristics of an individual in relation with various groups he/she appears to be a member. Accepted and shared values, norms and patterns of behaviour and especially communication patterns with in-group and out-group members are subjects of scrutiny and typical group-specific characteristics are described. As a consequence, individuals can be categorized and both specific and shared features may be discovered leading to disclosure of their identity.

Two questions instead of one
Returning to the question posed in the title of the paper we need to realise that in connection with identity we often search for an answer to a second, equally important question which has been hinted at while explaining the importance of identity research. The question is - "Who are you?" and we ask it mentally each time we enter into communication. While a true and detailed understanding of oneself helps to develop self-confidence in interaction, experience in discovering the identity of others serves for simplification of strategic decisions when choosing communication styles. A situation where an individual is not only aware of his/her various identities but actively embraces some of them while leaving others dormant can be described as identity avowal. Here we refer back to the definition of identity proposed by H. Tajfel who stressed the importance of an emotional involvement. We can further specify avowed identity as either routine or spontaneous, with the former used in response to some prompt, such as completing a form, and the latter being an identity asserted without any particular stimulus. This implies that a spontaneously avowed identity is much stronger than one evoked only in response to routine questions.

The opposite of avowed identity is an ascribed identity which means that other people associate an individual with a particular identity regardless of his/her agreement or refusal. Logically, the two types of identity cannot fully overlap; while in both cases the subject of evaluation is the same, the evaluators are different and the available information and emotional involvement differ as well. The act of asserting or enacting an identity forms the basis for the communicative perspective on the identity (Hecht 1993). When an individual avows an identity, he or she identifies with a group and asserts that membership. As Rotheram and Phinney suggested: A "reference group [is] the group that one chooses consciously to imitate" (Rotheram 1987, 27). On the other hand, an ascribed identity means that the reference group is assigned to a person by another one and may not be the same as the person's avowed identity. In such cases the degree of predictability of communication patterns may be limited.

The possible discrepancy between the avowed and ascribed identity can lead under certain circumstances to disagreements or even conflicts. We can demonstrate this point on the following example. Usually, the first ascribed identity a person encounters is the one of a child ascribed to him/her by the family and especially parents. The child accepts this identity without any reservations as he/she is not familiar with any alternatives. Each family establishes certain rules and norms of behaviour and the child follows them more or less. Later with increasing age conflicts may occur between the parents and child as he/she begins to establish other identities and shows tendencies towards abandoning the identity of a child. The parents usually continue to communicate with their offspring in the same manner which irritates him/her until a climax is achieved and both parties reassess their attitude. It takes years until the parents are able to accept their children as adults. Another source of discrepancy may be a different status associated with the same identity. An example of such alternative interpretation can be the gender identity, where females may have in a particular community a lower status than the one women wish for. In consequence, their avowed

identity of a feminist would be perceived by them as very positive and assertive while the public may associate the same identity with aggression and loss of femininity.

The distinction between these two kinds of identity, the one declared by an individual and that which is assigned to him or her by another, appears often in the literature, although various researchers used different terms to these concepts. For example, Cross distinguished between personal and ascriptive reference group orientation (Cross 1987); Grotevant pointed to chosen and assigned identity (Grotevant 1992). Hecht et al. discussed avowed identity as being 'internally defined' whereas ascribed identity is 'externally imposed' (Hecht 1993). For Rotheram and Phinney, the performance criteria of avowed identity refer to the "extent to which one feels and acts like a group member", whereas the ascribed criteria refer to "how others see the individual" (Rotheram 1987, 16). Within the discourse of this paper we prefer to use the terms suggested by Collier (Collier 1994) – avowed and ascribed identity.

As a person possesses a number of identities, both avowed and ascribed ones, any one of them may become relevant in a particular situation with various degrees. Identity performances can vary along three dimensions:
1. Scope of Identity Performance — describes how many aspects of one's behaviour express cultural identity.
2. Intensity of Identity Performance — means how powerfully one enacts one's identity, whether it is presented from time to time or is demonstrated at every opportunity.
3. Salience of Identity Performance — reflects how obvious the elements of identity are in one's daily routines. (World Bank 2012)

Out of the three identity dimensions identified by Collier, salience has received the greatest amount of attention (Collier 1989). Cupach and Imahori asserted that identity salience is situational in nature (Cupach 1993, 115). Similarly, Rotheram and Phinney pointed out that the "importance and meaning of identity varies with the specific context…and will be more salient in some situations than in others" (Rotheram 1987, 16). It has been even suggested that a particular identity becomes more salient when it makes an individual stand out in a specific situation. This 'distinctiveness' would suggest, for example, that a woman's gender identity both ascribed and avowed is more salient in a room full of men than in one full of other women or mix of both genders.

The concept of avowed and ascribed identity can be matched with a social psychological 'Theory of roles' as both social psychology and communication theory are concerned with the concept of roles. The theory is based on the research work of Mead and Linton and it considers most of everyday activity to be an enactment of socially defined categories or roles (e.g., mother, manager, teacher etc.) (Mead 1934) (Linton 1936). We can consider each role as representing a separate identity. Such an interpretation is in full agreement with the modern perception of identity as fragmented and consisting of a number of various identities. Each social role incorporates a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms and behaviours that a person has to face and fulfil. The theory is based on the observation that people behave in a predictable way in typical situations, and that an individual's behaviour is context specific, based on social position and other factors (Biddle 1986). The theory of communication combines behaviour with communication styles and assumes that each role has its specific communication patterns (Newliep 2009). Though, the consequences of proper 'reading' of context and choice of norms to abide by are straightforward only in theory; in real life situations one needs to count also with the personal identities of the interlocutors which may strongly influence the process of interaction. Moreover, it can be influenced by various role conflicts. A role conflict evolves in a situation when one person is faced with two simultaneous roles either ascribed or avowed while the communication patterns and norms of behaviour of the two are incompatible (police officer and close relative, teacher and parent, superior and friend). The person may solve the conflict by either choosing one of the roles and

refusing the other or trying to make a compromise between the two. The second alternative tends to cause misunderstandings or even communication breakdowns because the mixed cues and messages can be incomprehensible.

The theory of roles and role confusion are applicable for both monocultural and intercultural discourses. However, the intercultural communication is further complicated by the fact that though most of the roles exist in all cultures, their norms and rules may differ. Consequently, the expectations of both parties may be different despite their proper identification of roles.

Conclusion

We have presented an overview of approaches towards the concept of identity, its development and various forms. The historical survey reflected the changing perception of identity through times influenced by philosophical schools of thought. Each form whether essentialist, constructivist or the most recent poststructuralist one enables to gain better understanding of the implications identity has had in human life. The 21st century continues to value identity study predominantly in two research directions. Both social psychology and communication theory continue its study from opposite angles; social psychology is mostly engaged with the various stages of identity development while communication theory is mostly interested in the impact of identity on communication styles and strategies associated with avowed and ascribed identities. Both areas of research meet in their high estimation of roles as external representations of identities.

Thanks to a multiplicity of insights into the concept of identity a multidimensional model can be created. In that manner we can identify the various components of fragmented and shifting identities and comprehend better their situational and context related character. Through continuous research a more detailed understanding can be achieved of both one's own identity as source of confidence and that of others' enabling easier socialisation and in many cases understanding and mental reconciliation of observed behaviour patterns seemingly incongruent.

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