Identity in Modern Society

A Social Psychological Perspective

Bernd Simon

Blackwell Publishing

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Foreword

In this book Bernd Simon gets to grips with the problem of self and identity. He tackles it from a social psychological perspective and this is entirely appropriate since the problem *is* distinctively social psychological and it is in social psychology that important advances have been made in the past 30 years. The book is scholarly, original and beautifully written. He sets the scene for us, outlining the issues and background, provides an authoritative and lucid review of the three most influential traditions in contemporary social psychology (in both psychology and sociology), next attempts the task which nobody else has yet attempted, of bringing together the main insights of the major traditions into a unified and integrated theoretical framework, and then uses this theoretical formulation to generate a series of testable ideas which he and his colleagues explore in a variety of empirical studies across a range of important areas. In the course of this, he discusses the issue of the modernity or universality of the contemporary self and draws together the innovative ideas and findings which his studies have produced in different areas and which are already making an important contribution to current research. Simon's book is excellent both in providing a well-informed and coherent statement of what social psychologists know about the self and also in summarizing his own extensive programme of original research in terms of its key insights and findings.

Why does the self matter? In one sense the answer seems obvious, but in another, deeper, way the answer, I think, is still controversial. The self is a human universal. It is an undisputed given of human experience and life. It is found in all phenomena of human consciousness, feeling and action. We find it in the large scale, in the march of history and culture, in past and present arguments about the definition of our species, in conflicts between social groups, and we find it in the intimate, subjective and personal, in the deepest recesses of mental functioning. It is not possible to have a human mind, let alone be human, without self-awareness and without some identity

(or identities) of which to be aware. It seems likely (I would say beyond doubt) that the human self-process is biologically distinctive, being more complex cognitively and socially than that of other animals. Self and identity, therefore, are not matters of idle philosophical speculation. They are central to the scientific problem of how the human mind works. They are central to the issue of the relationship between human psychology and society, to the question of whether and in what way the mind has a social nature.

These questions – how the mind works and how it is affected by society – are linked precisely because of the nature of the self-process. This is one of the things, one of the most important things, we have learned from a century of social psychology. In looking at and trying to make sense of psychological functioning in its natural social context we keep finding the self. There is probably not one idea, finding or theory in social psychology which is not related to the self in one way or another, covertly if not overtly, indirectly if not directly, at first or second remove if not immediately. It does not matter whether one ponders attitudes and attitude change, crowd behaviour, group processes, prejudice and intergroup relations, social cognition, social justice or personal relationships, there is no way to summarize or explain what we have discovered about these phenomena without invoking the self-process in one or more of its varying guises. Attitudes, values, norms, goals, motives, memories, emotions, intentions, attributions, commitment, beliefs, decisions, expectations, justifications, and so on and so forth, are all terms for describing mental structures or processes which involve the self. Social psychologists may not have set out to study the self – and indeed we know that there were those who for metatheoretical reasons sought determinedly to do without it – but the simple fact is that in seeking to unravel the interplay of psychology and social life all roads have led back to self. It has gradually become clear from decades of research and hard-won theory that it is 'self', not 'attitude', which is our indispensable concept. Understanding the way in which it works to connect the individual and the situation, the way in which it functions as a dynamic principle of psychological activity, transforming the psychological by means of the social, the way in which it translates social structure, products, relationships and place into psychological resources, perspectives and activities, is probably the defining task of our science. Slowly but surely the self has moved to the theoretical core of social psychology.

This does not mean that the science is awash with theories of the self or that it is explicitly addressed in the bulk of research. There is no doubt that there has been great progress in the past 30 years – this book is a witness to it. There are now well-developed and influential theories, a high level of research activity directed specifically to understanding the self, and ideas about the self are shaping the mainstream of the subject. But there is still an historically, ideologically and philosophically derived tendency to downgrade the

importance of the self, to underestimate its centrality, to take it for granted in a way that dulls curiosity. Outside of social psychology there are still scientists and philosophers trying to build models of the human mind as if individuals were self-free computing or neurological systems functioning in a social vacuum. Inside social psychology, important phenomena are often discussed without any consideration of how they might relate to different views of the self. It is as if the researchers have never examined their assumptions about the nature of self, as if everybody already knows and agrees about the nature of the self, and of course, ideologically speaking, this can often be true. The self is sufficiently important that in one sense it has to be taken for granted, to be made a receptacle for the myths and prejudices of the dominant cultural and political understanding of human nature.

But good science is critical science and progress in understanding is marked by the clash between the scientifically new and the culturally orthodox. Amongst other things, Bernd Simon's book records the progress social psychology has made in rejecting some of the key myths about the self that have dominated psychology in the past and are still influential in social psychology and other fields. The 'axis of evil' in this regard is individualism, reification and reductionism.

In broad terms, individualism here means the tendency to define the self as a unique, purely individual property of the person, the idea that it is about one's personal identity as an 'I' or a 'me' (rather than one's shared collective identities) and that it is defined by or closely related to one's personality traits or other individual-difference factors. The alternative view deriving from self-categorization theory is that there are many levels of self-categorization (from the intra-personal to the individual to the group and collective levels), of which personal identity is only one, and that group selves are not idiosyncratic but shared and normative, constructed *inter alia* through social interaction and influence.

Reification is the tendency to define the self as a thing, a mental entity stored in the cognitive system, rather than as a dynamic social psychological process. In perceiving how individuals and groups behave in particular situations we abstract summary judgements from our descriptions which we then unjustifiably transform into underlying causal principles; these principles in turn are transmogrified into fixed psychological structures which supposedly cause the behaviour from which they were inferred. Thus we think of the self as a relatively stable and fixed system of cognitive structures somehow and somewhere stored in memory which causes the experience of self when somehow and somewhere 'activated'. What is self? It is a mental system, a mental homunculus, which we call 'self'. This attempt at explanation is wonderfully elastic and satisfying, since every self-response can be traced back to a stored self-structure, but unfortunately it is completely circular.

Even worse, it complicates the task of investigation by directing theory away from the idea of complex dynamic principles into the dead-end of Aristotelian 'essences' (as was pointed out by Kurt Lewin in the 1930s). The self is not a fixed thing; it is a complex social psychological process defined above all by a functional rather than a structural property, that is, reflexivity.

Reductionism here is the tendency to seek to reduce the self-process to the functioning of simpler, more elementary processes. It is in particular the tendency to deny that something special, new and qualitatively different emerges in human mental functioning and social life because of the way in which the self connects the psychological and the social. Individualism and reification are both examples of reductionism and go with it in this context. We see human beings solely as individuals, the content of whose selves is fixed and given in some pre-social essence. We act supposedly on the basis of our self-interest, our motives, drives, traits, likes, dislikes, needs, fears etc., as if these were fixed in our character independent of and prior to social interaction. Rather than explore or think about the interplay between our personal and collective selves, about how, for example, political ideologies and the position of one's group in the social structure create, sustain and influence people's personality traits through shaping their contemporary self-identities, the pervasive fashion is to reify the traits into fixed psychological structures and allude vaguely to socialization, genetics or even evolution to account for their origin and deny their sensitivity to current social forces (see Turner & Reynolds, in press). We fail to see that individuality is socially structured through the self, not pre-social, not prior to self. To allude to socialization, genetics and evolution to avoid confronting the complexity and malleability of the human self is inevitably to push a reductionist view of these phenomena as well as of psychology.

Social psychology has made a big contribution to the refutation of a reductionist view of the human mind. Four ideas about the self seem to me particularly important in this context. I shall express them in my own way and perhaps too cryptically, but they should still give the reader a good idea of why the self matters.

1. The self is the process by which individual psychology is socialized, by which individual psychology and society interact. Self-identities are social definitions of the perceiver (deriving from and produced by society, reflecting group memberships, social relationships and one's social place) which ensure that all cognitive, emotional, motivational and behavioural functioning take place from a socially defined vantage point and are regulated and mediated by socially produced anchor-points.
2. The adaptive flexibility of human behaviour, the capacity to vary what we think, see, do and feel from situation to situation in a way that is

reality-oriented, functional and appropriate, is made possible by our capacity to construct self-regulating self-identities in light of and on the basis of changing social circumstances. The self shapes how we act and can react and it is a dynamic, varying representation of the perceiver precisely because it is a social representation of the perceiver. The variability, heterogeneity and flux of social life are translated by the self into the cognitive and behavioural flexibility of the perceiver.

3. Human psychology and social life are characterized by emergent processes and properties made possible by the functioning of the self and irreducible to principles unaffected by a self-process. For example, if I may refer to my own work, we know that psychological group formation transforms the mutual orientation of group members by enhancing the relative salience of a higher-order, shared social identity (a collective self) compared to individuals' personal identities and that the former makes possible qualitatively different social relationships and psychological capacities. Human tendencies to sympathy, empathy, trust, cooperation, altruism and so on follow from seeing self as other than purely personal and egoistic and from including others within a shared collective self. Egoistic theories of altruism and other pro-social orientations, theories with a much reduced view of the human self, only explain these phenomena by defining them out of existence. The self-process explains why human individuals are not purely 'individualistic'.
4. The same self-process which enables humans to act as other than purely individual personalities is at the root of social influence processes which make possible the psychological reality of values. Human cognition is not purely individual, neutral, asocial, but takes place within a social field in which individuals always, implicitly or explicitly, test the validity of their beliefs against the views of others with whom they share a relevant social identity. The judgement of this collective self generates norms, rules, values and standards (of truth, correctness, virtue) whose validity is felt to be independent of the judgement of any individual perceiver. The collective self is therefore the basis of morality and perceived truth. What psychologists and non-psychologists alike refer to as 'self-esteem' is one psychological consequence of the functioning of social values in self-regulation. By means of the self, individual behaviour is compared to and shaped by internalised standards derived from group interaction.

In the following chapters Bernd Simon describes research which illustrates, tests, qualifies and extends these and other important ideas about self and identity. One of the great pleasures of this book is the effortlessness with which Simon moves between general analysis and detailed experimental work. Another is the fact that in one research topic after another he provides

compelling evidence for a perspective which contradicts received wisdom in the area. I think most attractive of all, however, is the way that thorough scholarship, excellent writing, imaginative theory and cutting-edge research are so seamlessly combined. One expects as much from someone who is immersed in and familiar with contemporary research on self and identity and who has already made original, important and influential contributions to the field, but it is a pleasure nevertheless.

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Canberra, April 2003

Reference

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Preface

The writing of this book has been motivated by my intellectual fascination for identity which, I suspect, is not free from biographical roots. Since I know myself as a thinking being, I have been fascinated by the question of 'how the social gets into, and is in turn made possible by, the individual'. The dualism alluded to in this question may have an experiential basis – not least in my own biography – but I always sensed that it was more apparent than real. This book on identity is an interim report on my attempt both to answer this fascinating question and to overcome the dualism it seems to imply. I am sure I am not there yet, but at the same time I feel some progress has been made.

Writing this book, as well as conducting the research on which it draws, has been a breath-taking intellectual adventure for me which I would not have been able to undertake without the company and support of many people. I am indebted to my academic teachers Amélie Mummendey, Rupert Brown and Tom Pettigrew for suggesting and introducing me to a social psychological answer to my question. I may not have been always a faithful student of theirs, but I suspect I owe even this '*esprit de révolte*' to their wisdom. Tom Pettigrew deserves special thanks for reading the entire manuscript and for providing many helpful comments. John Turner and Penny Oakes also played invaluable roles in the process leading to this book. Without their groundbreaking work on self and identity (together with other admirable colleagues), their intellectual inspiration and sincere passion for science, I would have felt too lonely to write this book.

As is apparent from the publications cited in this book, most of the research on identity I was involved in during the last 15 years or so resulted from collaboration with others, among them Claudia Hastedt, Giuseppe Pantaleo, Michael Loewy, Claudia Kampmeier, Birgit Aufderheide, Stefan Stürmer, Markus Lücken and Ludger Klein. Most of them were my students, and over the years some of them became colleagues and even friends. I am grateful

to all of them. I also wish to thank my colleague Rainer Mausfeld here at Kiel for suggesting interesting reading outside social psychology and for our hopefully continuing discussions about psychology and beyond. Maggie Ribeiro-Nelson deserves credit for proofreading the manuscript and Kristina Hauschildt for preparing the indexes.

Finally, I would like to express my very special thanks and love to Gilmar Iost, simply for everything. Please keep bringing cups of tea when I again slam the door because words are hiding from me while I try to write the next book!

Kiel, March 2003

Chapter 1

Introduction

Identity is fashionable. Everybody wants to have one, many promise to provide one. Lifestyle magazines advertise identities, fashion stores purport to sell them and pop psychology aspires to discover people's 'true' identities. It seems that interest in identity is particularly strong in our times, which are characterized by processes of accelerated modernization and globalization. For some of us, this interest is spurred by hopes, for others by fears. The former welcome or hope for an invigorating and playful 'anything goes' that liberates identity from the restrictions of tradition, the latter fear and caution against the anomie of 'nothing counts any more' that threatens to undermine the very essence of identity.

In any case, the general popularity of (the notion of) identity suggests that most people, irrespective of their hopes or fears, are fascinated by identity and what it does to and for themselves and others. For example, most of us would agree that identity is responsible for how we feel about ourselves and that a lack of identity or an identity crisis jeopardizes our well-being or even our physical existence. Also, identity is thought to underlie much, if not all, of our behaviour. Different people are thought to behave differently because they have different identities. We go to different buildings called churches, synagogues or mosques because we have different religious identities as Christians, Jews or Muslims. Alternatively, we may stay at home because we identify ourselves as atheists (or because as hedonists we are simply too tired to enact any religious identity after that wonderfully sinful party last night). Identity is also assumed to be at work in the soccer stadium when thousands of people in blue shirts try to scream louder than thousands of other people in red shirts. Similarly, but more dramatic in its consequences, identity is obviously involved when a majority group stigmatizes, mistreats or even annihilates a minority group. However, identity is also often praised for its socially desirable consequences. For example, it is difficult to imagine how loyalty, solidarity or social cooperation could be achieved and maintained without a sense of shared identity.

Hence, identity is not just a fashionable commodity that people strive to have or think they have to have; it is also intuitively very appealing as an explanatory concept. The present book respects this intuition as a fruitful starting-point, but aspires to go beyond popular thinking and discourse upon identity. The book is a more disciplined, scientific effort to employ the notion of identity as a social psychological concept in order to improve our understanding of the complexities and regularities of human experience and behaviour. Throughout this book, I use the notion of identity in a rather broad sense to cover also phenomena and processes which are often discussed elsewhere under the heading of 'self'. For the present purposes, the integrative potential of this broader use justifies the neglect of conceptual nuances and terminological traditions. However, where necessary, additional clarifications are added in subsequent chapters.

Approaching Identity as a Scientific Concept

Identity is a seductive concept. It can easily foster 'homuncular regression in our thinking' (G. Allport, 1968) in that we are easily at risk of reifying identity as an explanans (or independent variable). To avoid this fallacy, two measures are necessary, and hopefully, sufficient. First, we must also take into account the role of identity as an explanandum (or dependent variable). To understand the dual role of identity as both a social psychological explanans and a social psychological explanandum means to understand its role as a social psychological mediator in people's experiences and behaviours in the social world. Identity results from interaction in the social world and in turn guides interaction in the social world. This must not be misunderstood as logical circularity. Rather, it describes a causal chain in which identity serves as a critical mediating link (see figure 1.1). The assumption of such a mediating role of identity is the basic premise underlying the perspective developed in this book.

The second precautionary measure to avoid the homuncular fallacy is a more radical one. It prescribes that we need to entertain the possibility that

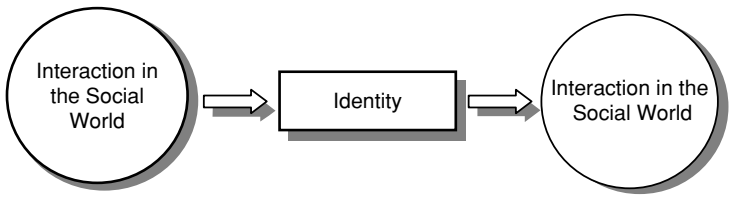

Figure 1.1 Identity as a social psychological mediator between input from and output in the social world.

identity could eventually turn out to be an analytic fiction. At best, the search for the essence of identity as a 'thing', say, in the form of a physiological or hard-wired mental structure, would then be a futile effort. But I fear worse. I suspect that such a search would be a misleading endeavour that diverts our efforts from a more promising *process-oriented* course. It may be convenient and common for lay persons, but not only for lay persons, to imbue identity with essentialistic meaning, but this tendency should itself be an object of scientific study and explanation (Medin & Ortony, 1989). It must not be reproduced in scientific discourse. This is not to say that systematic research on identity along the lines suggested in figure 1.1 is pointless. On the contrary, my conviction is that even if identity turns out to be an analytic fiction, it will prove to be a highly useful analytic fiction in the search for a better understanding of human experiences and behaviours. If used as a shorthand expression or placeholder for social psychological processes revolving around self-definition or self-interpretation, including the variable but systematic instantiations thereof, the notion of identity will serve the function of a powerful conceptual tool. It is the purpose of the subsequent chapters to demonstrate this power of identity by theoretical argument and empirical evidence. In addition to research conducted in controlled experimental settings, the chapters also build on research conducted in a variety of different field contexts of high social relevance, including minority–majority relations, intercultural encounters and contexts of socio-political mobilization and participation, in order to underline the ecological importance of the proposed identity processes.

Identity is a multifaceted phenomenon. Accordingly, it has attracted the interest of scholars from a wide spectrum of scientific disciplines. This spectrum includes, *inter alia*, philosophy (e.g. Flanagan, 1994; Popper & Eccles, 1977; Strawson, 1997), anthropology and cultural studies (e.g. Hall, 1992; Holland et al., 1998), political science (e.g. Preston, 1997), sociology (e.g. Stryker & Statham, 1985) and psychology (e.g. Baumeister, 1986; Turner et al., 1987; for overviews, see also Ashmore & Jussim, 1997; Hoyle et al., 1999). This book presents a social psychological approach to identity. It is therefore rooted primarily in the fields of psychology and sociology, whose major contributions to the social psychological analysis of identity are discussed in detail in the next chapter. At the same time, the particular approach presented in this book has also been informed and enriched in important ways by insights I gathered from the other disciplines indicated above. However, because I can by no means claim to be an expert in those disciplines, their influences are necessarily selective and I have most likely underused their potential contributions. In many cases, I would be unable even to pinpoint clearly the respective influences and correctly trace their sources because they have slowly built or bubbled up over many years of my scattered reading of

the relevant literature. I will therefore refrain from any archaeological endeavour to rediscover these influences.

In the remainder of this chapter I will instead delineate the wider multidisciplinary context of my scientific inquiry into identity. More specifically, I will discuss two important issues which can be thought of as markers pointing to two different poles of the wider spectrum of scientific disciplines contributing to the study of identity. These issues are (a) human consciousness and (b) the social conditions of human existence. The former points to the contributions to the study of identity made by philosophy, and more recently cognitive neuroscience, with their focus on intrapersonal processes, while the latter points to the contributions of anthropological and cultural studies, with their focus on the social relations between people or groups of people and the broader social processes affecting those relations. The following discussion reflects my understanding of these disciplines' promising attempts to illuminate the issues of human consciousness and the social conditions of human existence. Although I concede that the respective insights probably allow for a variety of different social psychological approaches to identity, I believe that no such approach should build on premises that ignore these insights. I certainly accepted the latter as important guidelines for the development of my own approach to identity.

Human Consciousness

Streamlike consciousness

Building on James (1890/1950), Flanagan (1994) suggests that the master metaphor that helps us to understand human consciousness is that of a stream: 'all individual consciousnesses are streamlike' (p. 155). This metaphor is meant to capture the phenomenology of human consciousness, that is, how consciousness seems or feels from the first-person point of view. It is not meant to imply that the physiological and brain processes that underlie consciousness are also streamlike. Nor is the suggestion that consciousness has a subjective streamlike character at odds with the reasonable assumption of special purpose processors and parallel mental processing (e.g. Calvin, 1990; Johnson-Laird, 1988). In an objective sense, consciousness may well be less streamlike and more 'gappy' than its phenomenology suggests (Dennett, 1991), but the phenomenology or subjective side of consciousness remains an important feature of human mental life in need of explanation. Moreover, as Flanagan (1994, p. 170) points out, even if 'consciousness is in fact realized like a movie reel consisting of individual images, the moments of consciousness, with small separations between them, the gaps', . . . 'a continuous impression may well

be what the system is designed to do'. Thus, rather than being an obstacle to scientific progress, attention to the streamlike phenomenology of consciousness is likely to contribute to an adequate specification of the explanandum and eventually to a full understanding of human consciousness.

It is the phenomenology of human consciousness that should concern us here because the subjective streamlike quality of consciousness seems to play an important role in grounding a person's sense of self or identity (Erikson, 1968; James, 1892/1961). Flanagan (1994) specifies several interrelated characteristics of the subjective stream of consciousness which facilitate such a role. First, consciousness and each thought in it are 'owned' because persons usually experience their experiences as their own. Although thoughts can be shared in the sense that they can be communicated and that similar thoughts can be thought in different minds, each person has to think his or her own thought and can experience only his or her own mental states and no one else's. Thereby consciousness supports the divide between self and non-self.

Second, although constantly in flux, consciousness feels continuous. From an objective point of view, our consciousness is constantly changing even over short intervals of time. We are always in a new state of mind characterized by a different neural pattern. However, from a subjective point of view, consciousness clearly seems continuous because 'even where there is a time-gap the consciousness after it feels as if it belonged together with the consciousness before it, as another part of the same self' and 'the changes from one moment to another in the quality of the consciousness are never absolutely abrupt' (James, 1890/1950, p. 237). From an objective point of view, consciousness may be interrupted by non-conscious periods such as periods of sleep. But, each normal consciousness bridges such gaps and reconnects to its past. As a subjective consequence, it feels unbroken and flows. In this connection, Flanagan (1994, p. 163) cautions us against confusing the contents of consciousness with consciousness itself. Of course, the latter is partly constituted by its contents, which are discrete and discontinuous. However, no qualitative contrast between different contents breaks the stream of consciousness. Every content of consciousness is embedded in consciousness itself. Even unexpected thunder becomes conscious as 'thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it' (James, 1892/1961, p. 26). This unbroken flow of consciousness supports the subjective sense of self-continuity.

Finally, this flow reveals a third characteristic of the subjective stream of consciousness that helps to ground a person's sense of self or identity. In accordance with James (1892/1961), Flanagan (1994) reminds us that we should not focus exclusively on the contents or 'substantive resting places' of consciousness. Instead, closer examination of the transitory flow of consciousness reveals 'the "penumbra," the "fringe," the "halo of relations" that is carried in the flow and is partly constitutive of the substantive state, that