

IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE:
A SHORT REVIEW

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Issues of self and identity have been a preoccupation in the social sciences now for several generations. This short review of the extensive literature touches on some of the most influential early writers and then briefly discusses the several directions in which more contemporary scholarship on identity has traveled.

Points of Departure

Up through the late 1960s, a considerable body of literature was produced on personality and the self-concept, on the conflict between individual needs and social demands, and on the effects of this conflict and rapid social change for the adapting person. The principal figures during this period were psychologists, including Erik Erikson, Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow, and Harry Stack Sullivan; sociologists and anthropologists, such as Ruth Benedict, Erving Goffman, Helen Lynd, David Riesman, and Georg Simmel; and philosophers and existentialists, including R. D. Laing, Herbert Marcuse, George Herbert Mead, and Alfred Schutz.

In this older literature, the self-society nexus was a central problem, along with a concern over the disruptions in self-concept and personality brought about by significant social dislocations and transformations—urbanization, bureaucratization, the rise of a consumption ethic, technological advances, the decline of major institutions, and so on. For many writers, these disruptions were seen to lead to painful uneasiness and destructive alienation and instability. For others, however, the effects of change were considered more salutary, leading to experimentation with new and adaptive ways to meet social demands and efforts to break free from narrow and restrictive social roles. The following titles are a sampling:

- Benedict, Ruth. *Patterns of Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934.
- Erikson, Erik H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton, 1968.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: Norton, (1930) 1961.
- Fromm, Erich. *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*. New York: Rinehart, 1947.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1959.
- Laing, R. D. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1965.

- Lynd, Helen Merrell. *On Shame and the Search for Identity*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon, 1964.
- Maslow, Abraham H. *Toward a Psychology of Being*. Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1962.
- Mead, George Herbert. *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934.
- Riesman, David, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denny. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950.
- Schutz, Alfred. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967.
- Simmel, George. *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (1903-1921) 1971.
- Sullivan, Harry Stack. *The Fusion of Psychiatry and Social Science*. New York: Norton, 1964.

Persisting Concerns and Lines of Theorizing

Continuations

More recently, studies of self and identity have moved in a number of diverse directions. However, two primary sociological texts that continue the discussion of the older concerns with the self-society connection and the impact of larger social forces on consciousness are:

- Berger, Peter L., Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner. *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*. New York: Vintage, 1973.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Individualism and Self-Fulfillment

Among others, two works that continue the concern with the self spurred by Maslow, Carl Rogers, and others in the Human Potential Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and address the contemporary “identity crises” and “tribulations of the self” are:

- Cushman, Philip. *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*. New York: Norton, 1984.

For explorations of the changes in the ways people structure their sense of self and/or pursue an ethic of self-fulfillment, see:

- Bellah, Robert N., et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.
- Clecak, Peter. *America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60s and 70s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Hewitt, John P. *Dilemmas of the American Self*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.
- Russell, Cheryl. *The Master Trend: How the Baby-Boom Generation is Remaking America*. New York: Plenum, 1993.
- Veroff, Joseph, Elizabeth Douvan, and Richard A. Kulka. *The Inner American: A Self-Portrait from 1957 to 1976*. New York: Basic, 1981.
- Yankelovich, Daniel. *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*. New York: Random House, 1981.

Personality, Character, and Social Change

Many works trace the emergence of a new personality type or character, shaped by or adapted to the changing social, cultural, and economic conditions of postindustrial or postmodern life. The new personality type has been variously categorized as an “antinomian” personality (Adler), a boundaryless self (Bell), a narcissistic personality (Lasch, Sennett), a “subject-directed” character (Leinberger and Tucker), a protean self (Lifton), a therapeutic personality (Rieff), and a “postmodern” (Wood and Zurcher) or “mutable” self (Zurcher). As with observers of an earlier generation, changes in personality or character are alternatively characterized as destructive or liberating, as a sign of cultural decline or a potentially fruitful adaptation to contemporary social conditions of flux and fragmentation. See:

- Adler, Nathan. *The Underground Stream: New Life Styles and the Antinomian Personality*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.
- Bell, Daniel. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic, 1976.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectation*. New York: Norton, 1979.
- Leinberger, Paul, and Bruce Tucker. *The New Individualists: The Generation after the Organization Man*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Lifton, Robert Jay. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. New York: Basic, 1993.
- Rieff, Philip. *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism*. New York: Knopf, 1977.
- Wood, Michael R., and Louis A. Zurcher, Jr. *The Development of a Postmodern Self: A Computer-Assisted Comparative Analysis of Personal Documents*. New York: Greenwood, 1988.
- Zurcher, Louis A., Jr. *The Mutable Self: A Self-Concept for Social Change*. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977.

Technology and Identity

Finally, recent studies also continue a concern with the impact of technology on consciousness and identity, though new technologies have raised new issues. Some works focus on how new communications technologies, including the Internet, which free interaction from physical co-presence, are affecting the experience of the self as unified and coherent and changing the context in which identity is constructed. For instance:

- Gergen, Kenneth J. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic, 1991.
- Meyrowitz, Joshua. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Reeves, Byron, and Clifford Nass. *The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Televisions, and New Media as Real People and Places*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

- Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

Another emerging interest concerns the new psychopharmacology. For a provocative examination of the effects of mood-altering drugs on the experience of self, see:

- Kramer, Peter D. *Listening to Prozac: A Psychiatrist Explores Antidepressant Drugs and the Remaking of the Self*. New York: Viking, 1993.

New Issues and Directions

In addition to broad thematic continuities, recent identity studies have also departed from the older literature in significant ways. The most consequential of the new developments has been to shift attention away from a concern with the individual's sense of self to issues of collective identity and political action.

Constructionism, Collective Identities, and the Body

One stream of the new scholarship, the social constructionist, has concentrated on identities of race, ethnicity/nation, gender, and sexuality. In these studies, collective identities are treated not as some primordial property of a group's members, but as interactional accomplishments that must be continually renegotiated. The following are a few notable examples:

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 2nd ed. New York: Verso, 1991.
- Waters, Mary. *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Nagel, Joane. *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

A notable subset of the constructionist literature questions the meaning of biological distinctions, such as the inscription of gender

on the body and the growing importance of the body to individual and collective identities. For example:

- Martin, Emily. *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Boston: Beacon, 1991.
- Schilling, Chris. *The Body and Social Theory*. London: Sage, 1993.

Identity Politics

Following on the politicization of identity by the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, another, and closely related, stream of research has emerged on the constitution of collective identities and the political implications that result from group struggles to self-characterize and claim social franchise. This is the literature on “identity politics,” which has been principally, though not exclusively, concerned with identities of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and social class. For instance:

- Balibar, Etienne, and Immanuel Wallerstein. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Castells, Manuel. *The Power of Identity*. Vol. 2, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997.
- Dudley, Kathryn Marie. *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Academic Postmodernism

Finally, the academic discourse of postmodernism has also been centrally concerned with an erosion of the belief in an essence or substantial identity defining the person. In fact, Robert Dunn argues that “the concept of the postmodern itself was an attempt to articulate a growing sense of the problematization of identity as a generalized condition of life in postwar Western society” (*Identity Crises*, 2). The literature on the politics of identity, itself a version of postmodernism, involves a critique of social hierarchies and emphasizes the negotiated and contingent nature of identity, difference, and the rules of inclusion and exclusion. Academic postmodernism, by contrast, influenced by French poststructuralism, involves an epistemo-

logical critique and abandonment of the rational and unified subject of Enlightenment philosophy. The many works of such prominent postmodern theorists as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard, all attempt in their various ways to “decenter” the subject and deconstruct established identity categories and their accompanying power-discourse formations. For examples of this type of postmodern theorizing and helpful discussions, see:

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Best, Steven, and Douglas Kellner. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*. New York: Guilford, 1991.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Dunn, Robert G. *Identity Crises: A Social Critique of Postmodernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon, 1980.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.