

# Perspectives on identity

## AN OVERVIEW OF IDENTITY CONCEPTS FROM PSYCHOANALYSIS, SOCIOLOGY, AND PSYCHOLOGY

Heike vom Orde

**This article uses selected examples to offer an overview of different perspectives in identity studies.**

Identity is derived from the Latin “idem”, which means “being the same [person]”. Researchers approach this “powerful construct” (Vignoles et al., 2011, p. 2) in different ways: identity is variously understood as a (cognitive) self-image, as something shaped by habit, as a social attribution or role, as a habitus, a performance, or a constructed narrative (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 194 ff.).

Identity is a constant object of academic discourses, which can be interpreted partly as a reaction to the radical changes that have taken place in modern times, and the crises that have often accompanied them. For example, George Herbert Mead’s theory on identity development emerged at the beginning of the last century in Chicago, against the background of a constantly growing number of migrants, who “threatened” the self-concept of the local residents. This led to a renegotiation of affiliation and difference, and a redrawing of the boundary between people’s own identity and that which was felt to be foreign. Thus questions of identity can be understood partly as symptoms of cultural upheaval.

This article aims to show the wide spectrum of perspectives and their historical developments, using a few important theories of identity as

examples. There is considerable variation in terms of the questions asked and the focus of attention: while psychology affirms the importance of self-concepts, educational theory highlights the developmental possibilities of identity. Sociology reconstructs the social prerequisites for identity concepts, while Cultural Studies and Media Studies focus on analysing the symbolic or power-related context of identity patterns. In some cases these perspectives build upon each other; sometimes they overlap, and at times they also contradict each other.

Thus classical theories, such as Erik H. Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, present identity as a development described in terms of individual coherence and continuity, which follows an essentially linear course and is oriented towards agents of socialisation such as family, school, or work. More recent approaches, however, speak emphatically of (sub-)identities, and see their development as a necessary and life-long work of construction. For most scholars, identity in the modern age is no longer a gift, but a task. This constitutes both an opportunity and a challenge for the individual.

Vignoles, Vivian, Schwartz, Seth & Luyckx, Koen (2011). Introduction: Toward an Integrative View of Identity. In Seth Schwartz et al. (eds), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (pp. 1-27). New York: Springer.

Berger, Peter L. & Luckmann, Thomas (1991). *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books.

### FROM THE GIFT OF INDIVIDUALITY TO WORK ON PARTIAL IDENTITIES

**Erik H. Erikson: Ego identity as a psychosocial development**



Erik H. Erikson (1902–1994)

Systematic discussions on identity began in the 1950s, when the psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson presented his model of development, in which the construction of a personal identity is central (cf. Erikson, 1959). He describes human development as a sequence of 8 focal crises or stages (Ill. 1). Erikson was one of the first theorists to refer to the formation of identity as one of the essential and fundamental elements of personality development

in adolescence. The development of identity is, according to Erikson, an important step towards a productive, fulfilled adult life. In adolescence this development goes through a necessary phase of crisis, where “identity” is pitted against “identity diffusion”.

Here, the interplay between “positive” and “negative” identity becomes significant; the latter refers to what one does *not* want to be and is important for separation from the parents. A **sense of identity** emerges, which Erikson defines as follows: “The sense of ego identity (...) is the accrued confidence that one’s ability to maintain **inner sameness and continuity** (one’s ego in the psychological sense) is matched by the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others” (ibid., p. 94). In his view, an ideal sense of identity is achieved when an existential experience of being-at-one-with-oneself is possible.

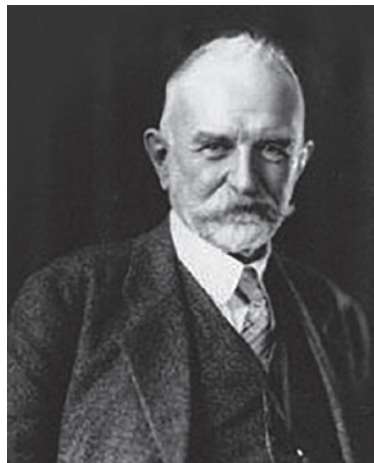
In the 1980s Erikson’s theory was subjected to criticism, some of it harsh (cf. Keupp, 2009, p. 55 ff.). This criticism was mainly focused on his idea of a continuous multi-stage model, where successfully passing through the different stages by adolescence generates a kind of “identity platform” for later life as an adult. This concept of identity as “**inner capital**” (Erikson, 1959, p. 94) presupposes societal continuity and predictability, in which self-discovery can reliably be achieved. This idea of

an identity that is secured and stable for life is deconstructed in the post-modern discourse with terms such as individualisation, pluralisation or globalisation (cf. Keupp, 2009, p. 56).

*Erikson, Erik H. (1959). Identity and Life Cycle. New York: International Universities Press.*

*Keupp, Heiner (2009). Identitätskonstruktionen in der spätmodernen Gesellschaft. Riskante Chancen bei prekären Ressourcen. In Helga Theunert (ed.), Jugend – Medien – Identität. Identitätsarbeit Jugendlicher mit und in Medien (pp. 53-77). Munich: kopaed.*

### George H. Mead: Identity as a social process



George H. Mead (1863–1931)

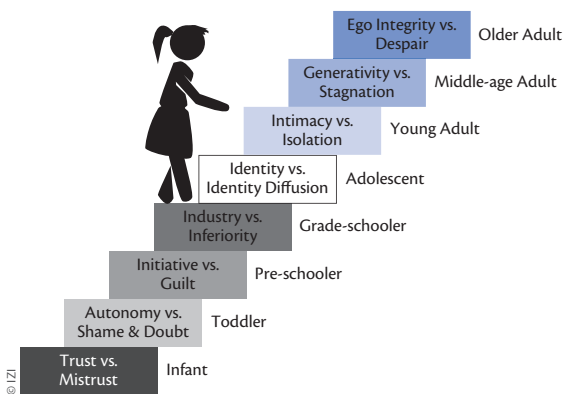
In the identity concept of the American social psychologist George H. Mead, the founder of symbolic interactionism, the individual forms his identity (**self**) through processes of interaction

and communication, with conflicts and anomalies in modern societies having direct effects on a person’s identity formation (cf. Mead, 1967). Mead’s perspective can be classed as belonging to the social psychology area of sociology. In contrast to Erikson’s coherence-based understanding of identity, Mead

sees identity formation as a relatively flexible construct. He emphasises the life-long influence of others on the development and control of our identity. The development of the self takes place as a complex interplay between the **me** (which contains learnt, internalised social role expectations) and the **I** (the impulsive and creative components of the personality). A person’s central developmental task, according to Mead, is to see interlocutors (dialogue partners) not just as individuals, but also, in a process of inclusion, as a **generalised other**, reflecting general societal norms and values (Mead, 1967, p. 158 ff.). Thus the self must constantly try to create a balance between the social expectations of the “me” on the one hand, and the “I”, the spontaneous self, on the other.

In the identity development of the child, according to Mead, two social phases can be distinguished: the play phase and the game phase (ibid., p. 152 ff.). In play, the child slips into the roles of **significant others** (i.e. important people in the child’s life such as parents) and thinks and acts from their point of view. In the game phase, the child must not only play the assigned role properly, but must also consider how to react to the actions of other individuals and why. By first adjusting to the perspective of a significant other and then to that of a generalised other (process of role-taking), children and adolescents develop their **social identity**. This involves internalising the images that they believe others have formed of them.

The identity concept of symbolic interactionism plays an especially important role in parasocial interaction and identification with media figures and actors (cf. Cohen, 2001, p. 248 ff.). As a subsystem of society, the media are a source, a setting, and a tool for identity work and identity construction. In engaging with media characters, the actions of these characters, and the constant shifts in perspective between what is being shown and their own attitudes,



Ill. 1: Developmental Stages and Psychosocial Crisis according to Erikson

recipients apply various facets of their own identity and simultaneously work on these.

Mead, George Herbert (1967). *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Cohen, Jonathan (2001). *Defining identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters*. *Mass communication and society*, 4(3), 245-264.

### Erving Goffman: We are all performing

For the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, identity is a construct that must be maintained by dramaturgical means. It is constantly in danger of being questioned, unmasked, or destroyed by others. In various works, Goffman analyses strategies of self-construction and the related forms of presentation (e.g. 1959 and 1963). In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman describes the techniques used by the individual to create and maintain a certain impression. In this context he utilises terms borrowed from the theatre, such as **interaction** (mutual influence of individuals on each other's actions), **presentation** (activities of an individual to influence others), or **role** (the pattern of action being performed, including the standardised repertoire of expressions used in a situation).

Identity can also be strongly shaped by the attributions of others. Goffman discusses the harmful attributions faced by an individual who, from the perspective of others, displays a characteristic deviating from the norm. Goffman refers to a characteristic of this kind as a **stigma**. A stigma can restrict an individual's freedom of action and can cause damage to his/her identity. The difference experienced between ascribed social identity and the attributes of personal identity is the basis on which the individual actively and creatively develops his ego identity – which is in turn the basis for his individual **stigma management** (1963, p. 132 ff.)

Goffman, Erving (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Goffman, Erving (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

### Heiner Keupp: Patchwork identity and resource work

Starting from the concept of identity found in Erikson's work, the understanding of identity changes, becoming increasingly process-oriented and dynamic. Vygotsky enriches the discourse by focusing on the role of language and communication (Vygotsky, 1962). The concept of **bricolage**, introduced to anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1962, is reflected in identity theories such as those of Berger & Luckmann (1991), who outline the development of partial identities or sub-identities. The German social psychologist Heiner

Keupp introduces a new term to the discourse on identity: **patchworking** as a metaphor for identity construction. His identity model is one of the most complex and comprehensive in the current scholarly discourse, as it integrates a large number of previous models of identity formation. Identity ceases to be a youth issue and becomes an endless, biographically open process (Keupp, 2002, p. 83 ff.). According to Keupp, the appeal of patchworking lies in the creative energy that becomes apparent in the design and the execution of the work.

“Successful identity allows the subject its proper degree of coherence, authenticity, recognition and ability to act” (ibid., p. 274). Keupp identifies a cluster of **resources** that are needed in order to be able to perform identity work, with self-determination and self-efficacy, in an increasingly complex society (Keupp, 2009, p. 65 ff.). These include social, intercultural and material resources, but also **resistance resources**, which enable people to understand and deal with suffering and failure, or to find and draw individual boundaries in relation to identity, values, and diversity of options.

Keupp also discusses the role of media as “storytelling machines” in his concept of identity (ibid., p. 71 ff.). Media provide **models of the “right way to live”**, not in the framework of a pedagogical and moral discourse, but in their function as a cultural industry. He criticises the two dominant types of story that describe the state of contemporary society: “On the one hand, the individual, ‘liberated’ from all ties, who sets off in pursuit of happiness, putting into practice the principle that ‘anything goes’. On the other hand, an apocalyptic world is constructed, and ‘eternal truths’ are offered in response” (ibid., p. 72). Instead of the narratives offered by the media, that of the “liberated and capable individual” and the “fundamentalist self”, Keupp demands more narratives that consciously allow the recipients to deal critically with models of the “right way

to live” and to reflect on the “risky opportunities” of current developmental processes (ibid., p. 75).

Vygotsky, Lev Semyonovich (1962). *Thought and Language*. Edited by Eugenia Hanfmann et al. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press.

Keupp, Heiner et al. (2002). *Identitätskonstruktionen. Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*. Reinbek: Rowohlt.

## David Gauntlett: Gender identity and the media



© David Gauntlett

David Gauntlett (\*1971)

From the perspective of the British sociologist and media theorist David Gauntlett, identities are complex constructions with several **axes of identity** (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 13 ff.). These include, amongst other things, cultural and ethnic affiliation, gender, age, educational status, and social class. According to Gauntlett, classification in terms of these axes of identity is based on the development of generally unstable balances, which have to be maintained despite inherent contradictions. In his 2002 study, Gauntlett examines the impact of the media on the development and influencing of gender identity. Gauntlett argues that ideas of gender and sexuality, masculinity and femininity, identity and self-concept are in a slow but continuous process of transformation. He refers here to **queer theory** and Judith Butler’s reflections on **gender as a performance**: “Queer theory is a radical remix of social construction theory, and a call to action: since identities are not fixed – neither to the body nor to the ‘self’ – we can perform ‘gender’ in

whatever way we like. Although certain masculine and feminine formations may have been learned, these patterns can be broken. By spreading a variety of non-traditional images and ideas about how people can appear and act, the mass media can serve a valuable role in shattering the unhelpful moulds of ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles which continue to apply constraints upon people’s ability to be expressive and emotionally literate beings” (ibid., p. 151).

Alongside other media products, Gauntlett analyses women’s magazines, and their potential to foster a **fluidity of identities**, carrying out a qualitative survey of their readers. His finding is that anti-traditional images of women predominate, “however – and this is a big ‘however’ – although women’s magazines encourage a degree of playfulness in terms of clothing and make-up, they would never encourage women to step outside their carefully imagined boundaries of the ‘sexy’, the ‘stylish’ and the ‘fashionable’” (ibid., p. 206).

In a further chapter on **role models**, Gauntlett emphasises that girls, for example, can be encouraged to be stronger and more independent by action heroines like Lara Croft without needing (or wanting) to copy them. Instead such figures serve as **naviga-tion points**, which can offer orientation to individuals (ibid., p. 250). Overall, Gauntlett sees the symbolic material of popular media culture – even if it can be contradictory and diffuse – as an important resource for work on gender identity, because: “Radical uncertainties and exciting contradictions are what contemporary media, like modern life, is all about” (ibid., p. 256).

Gauntlett, David (2002). *Media, Gender and Identity*. London: Routledge.

## CURRENT THEORY AND RESEARCH

In general, current identity theory and research focus on how identity guides

life paths and decisions, in what ways it allows people to draw strength from their affiliation with social groups and collectives (e.g. at the workplace), and how identity might explain the destructive behaviours that people carry out against members of opposing cultural, national, or ethnic groups (cf. Vignoles et al., 2011, pp. 2 ff.). At the moment, the role of identity in the workplace is a busy field of scientific interest (e.g. Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011 or Haslam & Ellemers, 2011). On the one hand, occupational identity can be examined at the level of the individual person, focusing on questions like: Who am I as a worker and where am I going in my working life? On the other hand, the workplace can be addressed as a context for organisation and group activity.

Such perspectives highlight the differing components of a single domain of life and as such, the potential exists for integrating them into a larger model. This model could show how individuals choose careers and how group and organisational dynamics in the work context determine the effectiveness of leadership, feelings of motivation, or perceptions of stress or burnout (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011, p. 725 ff.). For instance, research has found evidence that a lack of social identity can be a basis for burnout at the workplace and that the social identity approach can help to understand these dynamics (ibid., p. 735). Both the individual and the group aspects of work are important, and integrating them might be important in helping individuals to develop a healthy work identity. This is one example of how practically useful an integrative perspective of identity might be applied. ■

Skorikov, Vladimir B. & Vondracek, Fred W. (2011). *Occupational identity*. In Seth Schwartz et al. (ed.), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (pp. 693-714). New York: Springer.

Haslam, Alexander S. & Ellemers, Naomi (2011). *Identity Processes in Organizations*. In Seth Schwartz et al. (ed.), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (pp. 715-744). New York: Springer.

Heike vom Orde, MA (IZI)