From Self to Collective: What Has Identity Theory Taught Us?

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Abstract

Identity is a matter that social sciences have been working on for over a hundred years. The literature, which emerged with the interaction between psychology and sociology to a large extent and has aimed to shed light on the mutual interactions between individuals, groups, and social structures, has now reached a remarkable volume. Besides, identity has taken a key place in the research and analysis of different disciplines of social sciences. However, the extent to which this expanding literature contributes to a deeper understanding and explanation of identity is a matter independent of quantity. This paper theoretically discusses how far identity theory has advanced and which aspects of the concept have become better understood today, compared to the beginning of the studies, by reviewing the studies that we can call the cornerstones of the literature. In connection with this, it addresses the references of the individual, social and collective dimensions of the identity term. In addition, it critically evaluates the recent debates on whether identity is a useful concept for social analysis today and attempts to briefly expound why it is still relevant and significant for social sciences.

Keywords: identity, identity theory, social identity, collective identity

Özden Kollektife: Kimlik Teorisi Bize Ne Öğretti?

Özet

Kimlik, sosyal bilimlerin yüz yılı aşkın süredir üzerinde çalıştığı bir meseledir. Büyük ölçüde psikoloji ve sosyoloji arasındaki etkileşimle ortaya çıkan ve bireyler, gruplar ve toplumsal yapılar arasındaki karşılıklı etkileşimlere ışık tutmayı amaçlayan ilgili literatür, günümüzde kayda değer bir hacme ulaşmıştır. Bunun yanı sıra, kimliğin bugün artık sosyal bilimlerin pek çok farklı disiplininin araştırma ve çözümlemelerinde hayati bir yer tuttuğu ortadadır. Fakat genişleyen bu literatürün kimliğin daha derin bir biçimde anlaşılıp açıklanması doğrultusunda ne seviyede bir katkı sunduğu nicelikten bağımsız bir konudur. Makale, literatürün temel taşları diyebileceğimiz çalışmaları gözden geçirerek, kimlik teorisinin bugüne kadar ne ölçüde ilerlediğini ve kavramın günümüzde hangi yönlerinin çalışmaların başlangıcına göre daha iyi anlaşıldığını kuramsal düzlemde tartışır. Bununla bağlantılı olarak kimlik kavramının bireysel, toplumsal ve kolektif boyutlarının referanslarını ele alır. Ayrıca, kimliğin günümüzde sosyal analizler için yararlı bir kavram olup olmadığı konusundaki son tartışmaları eleştirel bir şekilde değerlendirerek kavramın sosyal bilimler için neden hala geçerli ve önemli olduğunu kısaca açıklamaya çalışır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kimlik, kimlik kuramı, sosyal kimlik, kolektif kimlik.

1. Introduction

Identity has become a buzzword in the literature of many branches of social sciences in recent decades. Nevertheless, it has a very diverse set of references and a very wide range of uses. For this reason, it is also one of the most complex and complicated concepts in social sciences. From the very beginning to the present, numerous studies have focused on studies of individuals' relationships with each other, their groups, and social structures, as well as on the processes of self-reflection and verification of identity (Stets & Serpe, 2016). These, in turn, made many aspects of the concept that remained in the shadows relatively more recognizable. Identity possesses a key role also in the behavioral sciences since many of the material and nonmaterial motivations behind both individual

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and group behavior stem from it (Kalin & Sambanis, 2018, p. 252). Especially after WWII, the increasing interest in the disasters created by totalitarian structures opened a wide field in identity studies and social sciences on group identities (Hornsey, 2008). But what has this vast literature on this concept achieved so far in its long journey? What has it taught us? And, lastly, should we still consider identity as a useful analytical unit or tool for social sciences?

This paper aims to provide a perspective on the concept by critically engaging with the related literature. For this purpose, it first attempts to grasp a deeper understanding of identity by beginning with a historical conceptualization. After that, what the concept means and indicates within social contexts are addressed by examining the relevant literature. Lastly, the scholarly debates on the concept's analytical convenience and sufficiency will be reviewed and discussed. In this way, the study will attempt to demonstrate both what identity theory has uncovered so far and to what extent the concept of identity is relevant in social science research today.

2. Emergence and Milestones of Identity Theory

During the nineteenth century, biological determinism had prevailed in the studies related to human behavior in compliance with the general atmosphere of science by the era. Nevertheless, the importance of socialization in the formation of human behavior began to be explored towards the end of the century. In a way associated with this general situation, the first scientists who dealt with identity formation within its social dimension were Cooley and Mead.

Cooley (1902) elicited that we develop our self-images through interactions with society; how the others see and perceive us shapes it and he called this "looking glass self." We form our self-image – implicitly identities also- by this looking glass self. Mead (1934) used "imitation" –as seeing the world from others' point of view- to explain the development of "self." According to him, children imitate parents to understand the outer world and then lots of others to grasp and internalize the cultural norms, expectations, and values of society and socialize in that way. Thus, each individual manages and controls his/her behavior by thinking about how the other people, the society would respond to it. Mead used "the generalized other" as the term which refers to the people other than self. He also divided "self" into two constituent parts: "I" and "me." "I" was the spontaneous, acting part, agent of action and what we generally refer to when we say "myself" while "me" was mostly an object, the reflection of "I" back to us from the eyes of "the generalized other" as our self-images. Mead thought that "self" was the production of a continuous process of interaction between "I" and "me." It is possible to find noteworthy parallels between the well-known Freudian trilogy of "id, ego, superego" and Mead's key concepts "I, me, the generalized other" (Fulcher & Scott, 2011). The term ego which is used for the conscious mind matches "self" built on the interaction between "I" and "me"; especially "me" has a strong connection with ego by its outwardness. The generalized other and superego have the strongest bond among the other pairs by their roles to control conscience through internalized responses of others. "Id" cannot find a good match in "I" since Mead did not have a real understanding of the unconscious; but Freud did not pay the necessary attention to context, to the situational presentation of self either. Therefore, they believe that these two approaches are complementary.

Based on Mead's theory and ideas to a large extent, Goffman (1959) has become another remarkable name by developing a theoretical stance in his magnum opus *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. It was based on an analogy between an individual's everyday life and theatre, including a front and backstage for anybody. He put forward that in the so-called front, people are actors on the stage and each of them plays various roles. In different situations and in front of different types of audiences, individuals put on different performances and the audiences also consist of other individuals who react to these performances. In this way, social structures provide the stages through which the identities of individuals are formed. This is a kind of impression management, and everybody struggles to present an idealized image of himself/herself in public according to the roles he/she is expected to fulfil. They are part of an individual's identity, but of course, there can be some contradictions, for instance, a responsible doctor in his job can be an irresponsible husband in his family.

However, he describes the term "backstage" where individuals do not feel the obligation to play the roles of their social identities and relax but get themselves ready for their roles as well. For example, after arriving his/her home, a policeman gets rid of his/her uniform and the other components of his job and that is backstage in terms of the mentioned role; but another role as a father, mother, wife, son, sister, etc. may start in the common areas of the home. Goffman elaborates his analogy by drawing some similarities with the parts of theatre such as setting, appearance, manner, etc., and social interactions. He constructs a dramaturgical perspective of identity formation. Jenkins (1996, p. 31) thinks that this perspective was familiar in history and Shakespeare posited it hundred years earlier with the sentence "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players."

The fact that this "theatre" analogy is similarly seen in Jung's famous concept of "persona" points to the complementarity of sociology and psychology on identity. According to Jung (1966), like masks worn in a theater to give an impression to the outside world, persona enables an individual to take on appropriate social roles. These two approaches are complementary, although one tries to analyze identity by focusing on external behaviors and the other on the psyche (Fawkes, 2014).

Another major approach that attempts to explain the development processes of an individual's identity within her/his life cycle and their relationship to the outside world has been formed by Erikson (1950, 1968). Erikson divided human life into eight stages and attached certain virtues to each of them. He attributed the individual's ability to build a healthy identity between the self and the social environment and to successfully resolve the conflicts in these stages. He claimed that unresolved issues would reappear before the individual in the following stage(s), causing problems and conflicts. He especially emphasized that the stage of adolescence is decisive on how the individual configures the relationship between multiple identifications, role confusions and one single identity. It should be noted, however, that his approach is largely confined to individual psychology, and the structure he proposes is not very open to scientific falsification.

In the discussions on identity formation, the distinction and the definitions through it set forth by Berger and Luckmann (1966) have constituted one of the most useful theoretical frameworks. They divide socialization -and so identity construction through it- into two parts. Primary socialization takes place in childhood; it is emotionally charged and entrenched in consciousness. The child internalizes the world

of his/her significant others -this is what they call the closest people to child during childhood- as the only choice. But in secondary socialization, the child internalizes institutional or institution-based sub-worlds; the options held are more, and emotional attachment is less. As an illustration of the emotional dimension, the child must love the mother, but not the teacher. For the optional dimension, we may give the example that a child's acquisition of shame for nudity is shaped in the primary socialization while the understanding of what to wear in various conditions is acquired in the secondary socialization, such as wearing formally for a ceremony.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), based upon habitualization and customs, institutionalization increases the level of predictability of interactions and by this way, agents can act at a low level of attention; actions are perceived as less astonishing and threatening. These help the stabilization of world and reality constructed. In my view, this is the most remarkable side of the study by shedding light on the construction of social everyday life human needs to be in.

To discuss the borders in identity, we also need the criteria of similarity and difference together; any of them is not enough on its own. Nevertheless, there is no "objective" sense of similarity or difference; we could only concern attributions and constructions made by people who are engaged in the identification of self and others (Jenkins, 1996, p. 23). In parallel, Hall (1996, pp. 4-5) asserts that identities require outside borders to define themselves and to construct themselves -or they can be constructed- through difference which he calls "constitutive outside." He holds that a healthy relationship with that constitutive outside helps the internal consistency of identity.

With his relatively recent studies focusing on a sociological understanding of identity, Giddens (2004) attempts to explain what stabilizes the self-identity of individuals in our "late modern age." He argues that "a person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively and, to a greater or lesser degree, communicate to other people" (p. 55). He asserts a self-identity cannot be found in the behaviors or reactions of an individual, but it can be reached with the capacity to keep a particular narrative –which is biographical continuity-going. However, it could be succeeded not only through action and reaction in daily life but also "continually integrating events which occur in the external world and sort them into the ongoing story about self." Therefore, we understand that what he means by "biographical continuity" involves a self-reflection of an individual to make sense and include the external world in her own story.

We still need further research concerning how different sources of identity and social mechanisms related to identity acquisition processes operate together, even though many studies on the psychological dimension of the issue provide theoretical clarifications to a certain extent. It seems noteworthy, especially to elucidate further how people juggle between multiple and various identities. In addition to this, we can state that the literature on identity needs contributions to clarify the relations between identity and perception of self-interest and the grounds of individual choice, which is a critical concept in social analyses (Poletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 299).

3. Social Aspects and Collectivity in Identity Theory

The main issue to focus on was self-image and the formation of "me" which is generally accepted to be formed within interpersonal interactions after the emergence of constructionist approaches in sociology. However, in the last decades, collective identities have risen in the discipline due to the shifting scholarly attention to the social and nationalist movements. Cerulo (1997, pp. 386-387) asserts collective identity was grounded in major works of sociology as well; Marx's class consciousness, Durkheim's collective conscience, Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft*, and Weber's *verstehen*. So, the similarities and shared attributes of group members that constitute a "we-ness" are not something new; rather, the way to handle that we-ness changed. Those are not seen as something essential or natural and their construction processes are questioned. Moving from this point, every part of the so-called holy trinity of identity studies –race/ethnicity, gender/sex, and class- has gained new perspectives. To exemplify, in gender studies the binary opposition of sexes was questioned, and the fixed roles are elicited to be the products of social certain processes to establish them. Or, in nationalism studies, it is showed that nations are not firm structures that have existed since ancient times, but the harvest of modernity to a great extent.

Poletta and Jasper (2001) claim that the reason why identities have been considered as an important component in social analyses and why sociologists have been attracted to this notion is to fill the gaps in the literature of social movements which concern mobilization and collective action. They define collective identity as "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (p. 285). They deem it distinct from personal identities although it may form a part of personal identity.

At this point, it is also necessary to mention a difference between social identity and group identity. The first comes into being when individuals match particular social categories and indicate their status in society. The other is not through such categorical memberships, but through participation in certain activities within a group and for the group's purposes. In the second, the interaction and mutual expectations of the group members are much more prominent (Stets & Serpe, 2016, p. 15). Collective identity in a close meaning to group identity is, therefore, used in the literature to explain various phenomena such as social movements (Melucci, 1989) and states in the international order (Wendt, 1994). It has been seen helpful in examining how individuals find motivation for collective actions.

On the other hand, a presumption such as the existence of direct causality between collective identities and collective action can sometimes be misleading. For instance, Olson (1965) showed up in his striking work which challenged and unsettled the two wide pre-acceptances of his day such as "everyone sharing the common interests will not act collectively to reach/obtain them." He started from the point that the basis of collective action is production or access to collective goods. However, once those are gained, all members of the social group will enjoy them. Thus, it is not rational for an individual to undertake risks of the collective action and invest resources for it since the others who do not contribute to the process at all will benefit from the result. The result (or proposal) he inferred from this "free-rider" problem is that organizations have either must force the prospective participants for collective action or commit to distributing selective incentives.

Collective identities come from group memberships, and this is associated with a sense of belonging which complements a crucial dimension of the wholeness of identity. Analyzing this dimension, the social aspect of identity, combining the approaches of social psychology and sociology is crucial. Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, which could be seen in the discipline of social psychology, has had a key role while discussing the social dimension of identity. They brought up an explanation to intergroup behaviors departing from an individual's striving for a positive self-image. To clarify, an individual identifies with her/his group, possesses a positive image of the group, and struggles to reflect this out of the group. This identification entails exaggeration of the similarities within the group and differences with the other groups (Tajfel, 1982). Group members tend to find and dramatize the negative aspects of an out-group and enhance the positive aspects of their group (Hornsey, 2008, p. 206). Aside from internalization, in-group favoritism and biased comparison, context and salience are the other crucial notions in the theory.[2]

As argued by social identity theory is that context (especially comparative context) is extremely important for identification. Social identities are not inherently attractive or unattractive; because the same group membership may both contribute to and jeopardize a positive sense of self and it depends on the other groups relevant in that context. Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (2002) use the example of psychology students to explain it. They could establish a positive identity when comparing their intelligence with the students from the faculty of arts or their creativity with the students from the physics department. However, when they compared themselves with art students in terms of creativity or with physics students in terms of intelligence, they felt inferior. "Thus," they conclude, "it is the social context, rather than specific group features, that determines the evaluative flavor of any given group membership" (p. 165).

Social identity theory has revealed that individuals develop feelings, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors in a way that conforms to group norms and prototypes through internalizing those norms and prototypes (Hogg & Reid, 2006, p. 23). It rejected explanations predicated on individual defects of physiology and personality, and in this way, it received serious attention from sociology (Callero, 2015). This interaction between sociology and psychology engendered a novel perspective which has enabled us to discuss many issues from poverty to ethnic conflict, from voting behavior to ethnic problems by associating them with the interaction between self and group identity (Kalin & Sambanis, 2018).[3]

It is largely accepted that identification processes and the other fragments –even if they seem diversified to a large extent and different functionally- enter an association and organization as the parts of a whole to compose identity. However, this whole is open to changes and evolutions to react

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[2] An important point to note is that Tajfel and Turner base their theory on minimal group studies. In their experiments, participants who did not know each other before taking part are informed that they are divided into groups according to a criterion determined for them. But actually, the participants are randomly distributed into groups. The experiments have drawn criticism because the groups had no shared history, and there is no planned future for them outside the limits of experiments (Hornsey, 2008, p. 205).

[3] This broad interpretability (or adaptability) is another point of criticism. According to some scholars, social identity theory is very broad, not falsifiable, it provides an overarching framework within which any experimental data can be interpreted (Hogg & Wlliams, 2000).

to the external world through its components though these are uneasy and troublesome. According to Wurgaft (1995), cultures and nations have struggled with this kind of crisis to adapt and broaden their identities to meet new challenges. It is compulsory to save their wholeness and to maintain their complex and interactive system. I find this perspective -observing a change in a structure as an aspect to maintain integrity- extremely helpful for the analysis of collective identities. Such grounds and conditions open up a wide field for identity studies and social identity theory which bring together sociology and psychology especially while the multiplicity of identities has been coming to the fore in the last decades (Deaux & Burke, 2010, p. 318).

Collective identity constitutes an intersection between identity theory and social identity theory, and it offers a theoretical ground to analyze the interrelation between individual, interpersonal, and intergroup levels (Davis, Love & Fares, 2019, p. 268). Collective identities rely on the presumption that groups are more than the sum of their components and could be regarded as agents. This kind of meaning and usage is what sociology concerns regarding its consequences for mobilizing joint action (Owens, Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2010, p. 490). Being considered as the motivation behind the joint action has brought collective identities in a central position in many sub-branches in social sciences, such as in the literature of new social movements. Dealing with various processes of collective action by focusing on common features of a group and its identity opened a new path to address social movements (Melucci, 1988). On a more general level, studies on collective identity have so far shown us that there is a reciprocal relationship between collective action and collective identity, and they both have a founding role for each other (Dovidio & Schellhaas, 2018). Considering all these, it is apparent that broadening and deepening our understanding of the social and collective forms of identity has a tremendous potential to make positive impacts on studies in many fields of social sciences.

4. Identity as an Analytical Tool

The great popularization of the term identity after the 1960s has been a ubiquitous complaint of many researchers in the last decades. Gleason (1983) put forward that the term became more and more cliché, the related meaning grew more diffuse, and this situation encouraged loose and irresponsible usage of its. Aside from general criticism, some researchers questioned its qualifications as a proper term to use in social analysis.

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argued that "the prevailing constructivist stance on identity" softens the term while trying to get rid of the charge of essentialism on it and prescribing that identities are fluid, constructed and multiple, this stance precludes any healthy handling of the term. We can obtain the main line of their objection which they elaborate during the rest of the work from this part:

> Soft constructivism allows putative "identities" to proliferate. But as they proliferate, the term loses its analytical purchase. If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere. If it is fluid, how can we understand the way in which self-understandings may harden, congeal and crystallize? If it is constructed, how can we understand the sometimes coercive force of external identifications? If it is multiple, how do we understand the terrible singularity that it is often striven for –and sometimes realized- by politicians seeking to transform mere categories into unitary and exclusive groups? How can we understand the power and pathos of identity politics? (p. 1)

They observed the proliferation of "identity talk" inside and outside academia. But they claimed that identity stands a multivalent and even contradictory theoretical burden due to conceptualizing all affinities, affiliations, and kinds of connectedness, commonalities, belonging, cohesion, self-understanding, and self-identification in the term. In addition, they strongly argued that the weak conceptions of identity are too weak to use for social analysis. They offer some concepts such as identification, categorization, self-understanding, social locations, commonality, connectedness, and groupness to replace identity in various contexts and through that way, going beyond identity which they do not consider as a useful tool for social sciences (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 36).

Jenkins (1996) agrees with the ambiguity and dividedness -between hard and soft meanings- of the identity term. Nevertheless, he asserts that discarding the notion of identity would not bring any useful result since it does not appear only in the toolbox of sociology or social sciences, but also in discourses of any fields from marketing to politics. Thus, removing it as an analytical tool would not be a good idea or good strategy of communication if academia wants to continue to talk to the world outside itself. That is why he argues that there should be a third way beyond rejecting the term and using it in every context without questioning.

Sökefeld (2001) does not agree with Brubaker and Cooper (2000) on their objection to the concept of identity due to its alleged ambiguity between hard and soft denotations. He contends that the reason why they reject using this term in fact gives it the richness as an analytical tool. It enables us to point the essentialist implications of its in everyday life and see the contradictions in them by a (de)constructivist stance.

Considering the discussion carried out in this study so far, rejection and removal of the concept as an analytical tool would be wrong for at least two reasons. First of all, like what both of the critics argue, that would bring about the disengagement of social analysis from the real life of society if you claim that you reject what they use widely. Although being critical of such ambiguous terms is essential, discarding those is a kind of extremism. Secondly, almost every key concept in sociology or even in social sciences owns various and sometimes contradictory meanings or references. Could we reject/remove and replace all of them? Would not it cause conceptual and semantic chaos? To my way of thinking, the only reasonable solution is to use these kinds of concepts responsibly as much as possible and to explain how these are utilized in a study or analysis.

5. Instead of a Conclusion: Some Reflections on Identity

After Cooley and Mead, there has been an enormous literature dealing with a wide variety of aspects of identity. Burke and Stryker (2016, p. 658) identify two main strands in the theory. The first one focuses on the relationship between identities and social structures. The impact of social structures at different scales such as family, school, neighborhood, social networks, ethnicity, and race on identity formation and development is of central importance in this strand. The second strand highlights the minds of human beings and related internal processes and examines how the self establishes, stabilizes, evolves, or modifies itself. However, proponents of both have recently recognized that these internal and external processes are complementary to each other. It is clear that more holistic approaches in this direction will take the theory further and increase its explanatory power.

The explanatory power of the concept of identity in social issues offers new perspectives to social sciences in almost every subject, from everyday problems between two individuals to the differences in thinking between different civilizational circles. To illustrate the point, Sökefeld (2001, p. 540) claims that "the kind of individual or self that is presupposed as the subjects of human rights is more akin to the projected egocentric Western self than to a socio-centric non-Western self." This situation becomes a point of departure to challenge the universality of human rights, and this thought looks remarkable to comprehend the broad individualist-communitarian debate and relativist stances on societies.

As another issue, it should not be forgotten that just as different periods can give new meanings to concepts and terms and may change how we observe and see them or what we expect from them. There are serious differences in this respect between the period when identity studies emerged and today. As a good example, Baumann (1996) compares the concept in modernity and post-modernity:

> Indeed, if the modern 'problem of identity' was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open. In the case of identity, as in other cases, the catchword of modernity was creation; the catchword of postmodernity is recycling. (p. 18)

As the last, we can say that identity is still a helpful tool in social research and social analysis for the reasons juxtaposed in the recent part of the study. However, it is for sure that social scientists must be aware of the uncertainty and ambiguity of such a term that some scholars aptly point out. Thus, providing readers with sufficient explanation or clarification related to the references of this term appears as a significant measure towards minimizing possible problems.

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