Identities: Never the Same Again?

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Abstract In response to the suggestion of treating identity as a historically bound notion (Matusov and Smith Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science 46, 2012), its genealogy is further explored. First establishing that identity has been understood in a particular personal way, and that genealogy might carry beyond this conception, as it also carries beyond the notions of class and adolescence that are used to contextualize identity. Then opting for treating historically bound notions as dynamic, studying them in the continuous interaction between conceptualization and practice, as processes and verbs rather than essences and substantives. Finally suggesting to dissociate identity from selfhood by looking at why, when and to whom we need to identify ourselves and also inverting the question: why and when do we ask others to identify themselves? After all, sameness and difference are two sides of a coin called identity, and what is looked at is a matter of how it is looked at.

Identity is a widely used but poorly defined notion. Faced with its myriad uses in the human and social sciences, Matusov and Smith (2012) propose a genealogical analysis. In earlier conceptual clarifications scholars have criticized the acclaimed universality of identity and advocated a more flexible, diverse, relational notion. However, say Matusov and Smith, they do not take into account that 'identity' is

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contextually and historically bound. In agreement with Michel Foucault's anti-essentialist method and emphasis on historical practices, they suggest to move from a conceptual world to the history of socio-economic classes. Identity is situated responding to, and making sense in, US middle class society during the 1950's. Their main argument, also based on multicultural experiences contesting the notion of identity, is that the ecological validity of identity across contexts is limited and cannot simply be transferred from one to the next. With this argument and the call for genealogical analysis the authors make an important contribution. Also their analysis of middle class discourse is very interesting. However, some circularity can be observed between the definition of identity they criticize and the context in which they situate its emergence. Also, in criticizing one notion other social scientific notions are maintained, and apart from power on a micro level, some macro-level mechanisms are presupposed. Thus providing an occasion to wonder about the complexity of genealogy, the changing meaning of identity, and alternative ways of seeing ourselves.

The Genealogy of (A Particular) Identity

The analysis starts out with Erikson's classical notion of identity. From his research, done mainly among European-American middle class adolescents, identity arose as a problem or crisis specific for youths, related to the difficult career choices they had to make. Matusov and Smith argue that the preoccupation with self and perception of choices is something particularly middle class, as it arises in the US after the world wars. They define "the phenomenon of identity as a historically emerged public discourse about negotiation between available ready-made choices and discourse on self." (p.10). Particularly the emphasis on individual choice in the notion of identity is criticized, as it cannot be generalized across contexts. The authors warn for imposing the specific cultural practices of talking about the self and (wishful) thinking in terms of choices. Indeed, it is harmful to make people responsible for their own misery if they do not possess the luxury to determine themselves. Yet, the notion of identity analyzed in this article is particularly personal. As it is local, it should not reach as far beyond its context as it currently does, but it is somehow unsatisfactory that the genealogy of identity starts with Erikson. The notion thus becomes a researchers crystallization of the context in which he worked, bound to involve some particular intellectual interest.[1] It tells us about how a great deal of psychology, particularly when boosting individual choice, is based on the US middle class, but less about the power practices giving rise to identity.

When practicing genealogy, we seek the non-essentialist. Foucault states in his chapter on Nietzsche, Genealogy, History: "no one is responsible for an emergence; no one can glory in it, since it always occurs in the interstice" (1999, p. 85). Certainly Erikson did not invent identity, nor was he the one to give it a personal meaning. Indeed, in genealogical analysis I find it particularly difficult to figure out where to start, as there are always previous conditions diversifying into the past as roots into the ground. Matusov and Smith are concerned with a particular notion of

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[1] In parallel in the research by Gee, as mentioned by Matusov and Smith, "the identity discourse may in fact be co-constructed between the University-based researcher and the high-school subjects" p. 14

identity, such as: "people tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and they try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities." (p.12). Their concerns with an objectifying and universalist notion are much appreciated, but I'd like to know about the "various systems of subjection" and "the hazardous play of domi- nations" (Foucault 1999, p. 83) beyond and before the notion, or at least how it was appropriated by psychology. So, what was there before Erikson?

Searching for 'identity' in old English and French dictionaries is not really a Foucauldian thing to do. That's why Matusov and Smith steer away from a concep- tual world towards social history. Yet, the notions they use to contextualize, 'class' and 'adolescence', are just as historical as 'identity'. This is at least what becomes clear in a history of concepts, studying the interaction between concepts and practi- ces, quite different from the much criticized history of ideas. The dictionary could be a point of departure for 'Begriffsgeschichte' taking (social) practices into account (Koselleck 1996) or a way to start investigating interaction effects between human categories and practices (Hacking 1995). This might clarify where Erikson got his 'identity' from. So in my curiosity I did a little conceptual exploration.

Now, it seems that before referring to something distinctively personal, identity just meant 'sameness'. The definition of Gillis (1994), stating that the core meaning of any individual or group identity is a sense of sameness over time and space, is reminiscent of the Latin root 'idem'. Consulting a couple of 18th and late 19th century dictionaries suggests that identity became a personal matter in the course of the eighteen hundreds. In the former we can find entries such as 'identity is defined by metaphysicians, to be the agreement of two or more things in another' (Bailey 1742) or 'ce qui fait que deux ou plusieurs choses ne sont qu'une, sont comprises sous une même idée' (Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française, 1798). Identity does not appear as something personal or a sense of self. The psychological notion is found later: 'the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality' (Murray 1888). Here 'personal identity' is explicitly mentioned, with reference to Locke's definition (the sameness of a rational being) and to Hume's (identity is common for every being whose existence has any duration). In the French counterpart, of course, reference is made to French philosophers; following Voltaire and Rousseau identity is 'conscience qu'une personne a d'elle-même' (Émile Littré: Dictionnaire de la langue française, 1872–77).

Identity has two seemingly contradictory meanings nowadays, one referring to sameness and another to differentiating an individual. Wondering how the logical operation of 'idem' could end up meaning its personified opposite, I stumbled upon the 1835 Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française specifying that identity is used particularly in jurisprudence when talking about recognizing a person under arrest, an escaped prisoner, a dead man, etc. That rings a bell, indeed Foucault himself situates the birth of the subject, coinciding with that of the sciences gathering knowledge about subjects, in disciplinary and punitive practices (1977). How the genealogy of the personal notion of identity is related to the genealogy written by Foucault is a question begging further investigation. Was 'identity' personalized or subjectified in the same process or context that gave rise to psychology, or was the

notion appropriated and transformed by psychology? Was it an interaction between intellectual ideas such as those of Locke and Rousseau on the one hand and disciplinary practices on the other? Or, taking sameness of the self as difference from others, are the two meanings not that contradictory after all? The conceptual development becomes a little more clear in Ricoeur's distinction between *ipse* identity (sameness in the first-person: self-constancy) and *idem* identity (sameness in the third-person: object constancy; 1992). Be it however it may, personal identity goes further back.

Erikson's notion of identity arose in a context where the administration and categorization of the individual, in terms of gender, nationality and class, was fully functional, and where selfhood and its scientific study had already been developing. The further individualization of the notion might be indebted to US middle class society, as it is also where psychology boomed in academic productivity, but let's not forget that a great deal of discourse and practices were likely inherited from or in communication with their continental counterparts. The US context was one of cultural importation and hybridization. The notion of identity has probably never been crystal clear, neither essential nor objective, inheriting from different contexts and adapted in others.

Dynamic Identity

As genealogy 'demands relentless erudition' (Foucault 1999, p. 77) and therefore much confuses me, I rely on my readings of Reinhart Koselleck and Ian Hacking, from the fields of philosophy of history and philosophy of (human) science respectively. Maybe because there I find the optimistic ironical twist in the ideas of Foucault (something I can identify with). They suggest that historical concepts and human kinds change meaning over time while applied in practice, and at the same time stem from particular cultural and historical practices. Identity, especially when different meanings are found at different points in history, might very well be such a dynamic notion. Applied in different contexts it might mean and imply different things. Probably the personalist notion has changed since Erikson, according to different disciplines, contexts and interests. The concern with imposing one particular notion on other contexts -a kind of identity imperialism- then becomes a concern with the uncritical, essentialist and objectivist use of the term. In other words, a concern with psychology confirming a particular cultural status quo (Danziger 1999). However, the notion can also be assimilated by and adapted to a new cultural environment. There's a difficulty with psychological notions in determining whether they are imposed outside their jurisdiction, or are adopted in a new context. Most likely both processes occur simultaneously in some kind of co-construction or interaction. As Hacking (1995) explains, human kinds can also be self-attributed. Identity can be imported and transformed. The rebels rejecting identity, examples given by Matusov and Smith (2012), still have a sense of self, and adjust their own notion of 'identity'. Certainly, they provide a critical reflection on social scientific terminology, but in Foucauldian terms, they are as liberated from identity as the hippies were from sexual repression. That is to say, in the rejection is the recognition. But then, as unavoidable it is to be subject to notions and their practices that we are involved in, it is also unavoidable

that they change. And thus identity might stray from US middle class, as the internally contradictory imperative of having a choice (Valsiner 2012) in other circumstances is immediately confronted with impossibilities. Both concept and person will need to adapt upon crossing the border, and that is something we do all the time and with increased frequency in current globalised practices.

Thus, the attempts to objectify identity are likely to be in vain. The human and social sciences aim at moving objects, according to Hacking (1995). Also identity "is constantly in a process of construction and maintenance, and it can never be presented as if its essence has a static form" (Valsiner 2012). Assuming the volatile and organic reality the detrimental effects of an essentialist notion are avoided. We should be weary of a universalist psychology, but there are reasons to believe that such a discipline does not deal with (plu)reality anyway. "[D]irect questions about identity lead to its entification—which is a crystallized form of a process the role of which is to stay in a dynamic form." So instead "identity needs to be studied as a process—not as a thing." (Valsiner 2012). Hence, in virtue of a fruitful future debate, you can forget all I've written above: we need to talk not about a substantive identity, but about the verb identifying or identification, for example.

Alternative Approaches

In expanding the vision of self away from identity some essence remains; Matusov and Smith suggest an anti-identity discourse in which a notion of self still stands. Taken from the work of Bakhtin it is a dialogical notion. Entering in dialogue are two aspects of self: the "soul" or I-in-the-eyes-of-others and "spirit" or I-for-myself. But there's an "I" nonetheless, even though the conceptualization of Bakhtin requires a simultaneous focus on "soul" and "spirit", and emphasizes that it does not concern a well-defined unit. "Rather, the self is a *distinct point of view on the world and on oneself*." (Bakhtin, quoted by Matusov and Smith on p. 15).

Needing 'selves' to get out of an identity discourse in which the notion is understood as a kind of 'selfhood' is somehow contradictory. As the notion of personal identity is related to the notion of self (there might even be a genealogical relation), formulating alternative notions of one using the other is not a Foucauldian thing to do. The 'self' does not escape genealogical analysis and is subject to the same anti-essentialist critique. Matusov and Smith are very aware of that, and make a clear distinction between genealogically analyzing 'identity' and suggesting alternatives. Yet, maintaining the notion of self, characterizing it in a dialogical way and emphasizing self-determination, is similar to the attempts of many other scholars to make the notion of identity more flexible. The anti-discourse does not eradicate what lies underneath, but rather confirms a particular 'self'-ish notion of identity. More interesting is their suggestion to study "*when, to whom,* and *why* people talk about themselves" (p.15).

Indeed, an interesting alternative approach might be unhooking identity from selfhood by looking at the actions of identification and identifying. Rochat (2009) argues, in line with Mead (1934) and similar to Bakhtin's argument, that our being able to reflect upon ourselves, develops from our interaction with others. We know

ourselves (or become our own subject, paying lip-service to Foucault) through the eyes of others. If there were no others there would be no need to identify ourselves, or to present ourselves consistently, in Bakhtin's words. If self-consciousness is incorporating how others see us, then identity might not be a matter of self-awareness (or "spirit") but rather a crystallization of an action of others towards us. That is, the act of identification or identifying. Often we start identifying ourselves after others have presented us with (variations of) the question 'who are you?'. Equally often we forget that we also impose this question on others. In our demographic curiosity we continuously demand their 'identity', understood in terms of gender, age, nationality, profession etcetera. As if we are all working at customs, and hardly allowing for flexible self-understandings, complex narratives or relational experiences. These concerns have become particularly vivid after living abroad for many years. The question 'where are you from?' still repeats itself, and has gradually become as boring as its answer is little informative. I'm probably more of an ongoing collection of experiences with many different people and contexts than representative of my country of birth. So I propose those who insist to ask me any other question that might reveal something about me, as long as it isn't a typical one. Knowing that I cannot pick a favorite color, is more telling than any standard category. Indeed, it is in the practices of categorizing others (and categorizing ourselves in their terms, often voluntarily, but also because societies demand us to) that identity limits the "soul". Reflecting upon our own actions of identification and identifying might provide an excellent opportunity to start to know others as continuously moving; meanwhile realizing that our act of knowing (also in the human and social sciences) is dynamic in itself.

Matusov and Smith propose a Foucauldian liberation from identity, and (apart from the question whether this is even possible) this might be interpreted as confronting the third person imperative on ourselves. But then we should not impose on others either. A Russian attributing a fake smile to an American is doing exactly the same thing as an American characterizing Russian identity. Looking further into 'identification' we might find a sameness in how we act towards each other, reflect and open up for other ways of understanding. To understand others in movement, or studying identity as a process, might involve letting go of standard (social scientific) categories all together, as they tend to crystallize. More interesting, however, is to study why we crystallize and how the practices of identification (in the human and social sciences, at international airports, in job interviews, in promoting a bill, in appealing to our rights) fix identities; how they are simultaneously cherished and contested and in their sheer variety and plasticity might never be the same again. Indeed, the authors have succeeded in stirring the debate.

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