Reconciling Identity and Diversity: The Narrative Conception of Identity

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Abstract: The concept of (individual and collective) identity has come to the fore in sociological debates in recent years, and the idea that identities are multi-faceted has become widely accepted. However, clarification of the nature and structure of such identities is often cursory. In this paper, I argue that the hermeneutical conception of narrative identity provides the most adequate basis for a conception which does justice to both diversity and singularity that is implicit in the idea of internally multiple identities. In particular, I argue that Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of the narrative’s capacity to reconcile identity with diversity, variability and heterogeneity gives rise to a highly productive notion of identity as a dialectic of concordance and discordance.

Keywords: Identity, Narrative, Collective Identity, Hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur

THE CONCEPT OF identity has acquired a notable salience in intellectual debates in recent years. However, it has often been deployed with little clarification, and a number of unresolved issues have accompanied its use. Notable in this regard are the difficulties which have been encountered in attempts to theorise the internal plurality and fluidity of identities. The idea that identity is ‘multiple’ has been one of the hallmarks of the theorising of identity that has occurred, but while there is widespread agreement that it is necessary to be cognisant of the complexities of identity, there has been less convergence around attempts to translate this premise into conceptual terms. In this paper I will briefly examine the uses and vicissitudes of the concept in two theoretical domains, before undertaking an exploration of what the philosophical hermeneutical notion of ‘narrative identity’ could contribute to sociological analyses of the problematic.

Part 1

It is not hard to pinpoint the developments which have brought the concept of identity to the fore over the past several decades. On the one hand, a series of socio-political transformations, including the rise of identity politics and the emergence of multifaceted ‘culture wars’ which have overshadowed, even if they have not eliminated, social conflicts along class lines have called for an analysis of identity. At the same time, theoretical developments have contributed to a new interest in the idea of identity. Most significant in this regard has been the ‘cultural turn’ in social thought. As Wagner and Friese have described it, there has been a widespread shift away from the previously dominant view that social life is something that happens in ‘structures’ or ‘systems,’ and its corollary that human beings are defined by roles and interests which are derived from their position in the social order to the view that social life is ordered by meanings and beliefs, and its corollaries that human beings live together in “cultures” and recognize the similarity or strangeness of “the other” by their cultural identities (Wagner and Friese, 2001:117).

The focus on the concept of identity that has emerged from these overlapping developments has been evident across a broad spectrum of disciplines and issue areas, including feminist theories of subjectivity, debates within normative political theory over ‘recognition versus redistribution’ and sociological analyses of modernity and postmodernity, nationalism and communitarianism and the complex and ambiguous ramifications of globalisation. A brief look at two of these domains will bring to the fore some of the issues that attempts to theorise the internal multiplicity of identity have encountered.

Emerging in response to one of the paradigmatic eruptions of identity politics in the latter half of the twentieth century, second wave feminist theory was from the outset centred on analyses of women’s experience which stressed the distinctiveness of constructions of female identity and subjectivity. It is well known, however, that feminists’ initial attempts to theorise universal notions of feminine identity and subjectivity quickly gave way to the realisation that the idea of an undifferentiated category of woman was untenable. The initial impetus in this regard was largely political; as it was recognised that the situations and concerns of all women were far from identical, emphasis was increasingly put on ‘differ-
ences,’ not only in relation to interests, but also to identity, with particular stress on those associated with race, ethnicity, and class. The stress on multiple social sources of identification was closely connected to feminist analyses of subjectivity, and the idea that subjectivity is immersed in multiple contexts, and is a site for the ‘play of difference’ resonated widely.

The widespread acceptance of the need for more differentiated conceptions of identity and subjectivity did not, however, lead to unanimity about the best way to theorise the multiplicities involved. Three approaches have dominated feminist debates. Rival poststructuralist approaches, including deconstruction and especially Foucaultian discourse theory, were widely taken up, perhaps most influentially in Judith Butler’s Foucaultian theory of gender as performativity (Butler, 1990). Others turned to psychoanalysis to argue that the unity of the subject is undermined by conscious and unconscious forces that make psychic life a process of change. Along these lines, Jane Flax (1990; 1993) has attempted to connect the psychoanalytic perspective with the postmodern emphasis on heterogeneity, multiplicity and difference. From a third perspective, a number of feminists have sought to incorporate a new receptivity to the idea of difference within critical theory frameworks. Theorists such as Seyla Benhabib (1992; Benhabib et al, 1995) participated in the movement to ‘situate the self,’ while remaining highly critical of what they saw as the emptying out of the concepts of selfhood, agency and autonomy - crucial to the political-normative concerns of feminists - within perspectives influenced by post-structuralism and postmodernism.

More recently, however, some areas of common ground have emerged. Commentators across a wide section of the theoretical spectrum are calling for a more nuanced response to the issue of multiplicity and difference, arguing that it is necessary to think unity and diversity together. From the ‘sexual difference’ perspective, Rosie Braidotti insists that subjectivity is a multiple, complex process, but has called attention to the need to rethink the unity of the subject in a way which links the body and the mind in a new ‘flux of self’ (Braidotti, 1993). At the same time, Flax’s longstanding caution regarding the themes of difference and multiplicity has led her to call for a rethinking of subjectivity as ‘multiplicities’ which are neither fixed nor fragmented.

Flax’s work illustrates some of the difficulties more widely evident. She highlights the negative side of fragmentation of the self that is often over-valorised in postmodernist perspectives, arguing that far from finding the ‘egoless experience of the sublime’ liberatory, many of her patients experienced the absence of any meaningful sense of interiority or coherence as a source of profound terror (1990:219; 1993:105). Her analysis has its most direct bearing on the problematic of identity when she suggests that subjectivity involves temporary coherences of multiple ‘threads’ which may web together into seemingly solid structures, but which may subsequently separate and reform. Crucially, however, she leaves unaddressed the questions of how the processes of formation and reformation of cohering threads happen, and what experiential form they take. The same issue can be seen more broadly in feminist research which underlines the multiplicities of identity, and in particular the ‘intersections’ of gender, class and race. The recognition of this complex reality is not accommodated by an account of the overarching structure which contains and connects the multiple class, race and ethnic strands of an identity, nor an exploration of the experience of unity involved.

A second theoretical domain in which the concept of identity has acquired a central place is the emerging paradigm of ‘multiple modernities.’ This new, and highly fertile, macro theory of contemporary society is part of the cultural turn in social thought identified by Wagner and Friese, and its distinctive premise is the indeterminacy of culture (Eisenstadt, 2000b; Arnason, 2001; 2003). There is, as Eisenstadt puts it, no uniform developmental logic underlying the cultural innovations that have characterised world history (Eisenstadt, 2000b). Its defining theme is the polymorphousness of modernity, and while it thematises multiple axes of differentiation, its most distinctive argument is that diverse ‘civilisational’ legacies give rise to multiple models of modernity (Eisenstadt 2000a; 2000b; Arnason, 2001). Two departures from prevailing trends in thinking about the modern world follow from this starting point. In the first place, the conception of modernity as a break with tradition, and its corollary, that the Western breakthrough to modernity resulted in a culture-neutral, ‘universal’ model are replaced with a line of argument which insists that the dominant model bears the lasting influence of the civilisational particularities of the Western traditions out of which it emerged. Equally importantly, the new approach stresses the lasting impact of non-Western civilisational contexts on other modern constellations. The export of the Western model around the world has shaped modernising processes globally, but non-Western forms have been co-determined by the encounter with local civilisational settings, and departures from the Western model can not be considered as signs of incomplete or distorted modernisation.

The thematic orientation and perspectival premises of the paradigm of multiple modernities has entailed a significant rethinking of received conceptual infrastructures for analysing contemporary social configurations, and the framework that has emerged is centred on the concepts of interpretive and institu-
tional frameworks. In a key statement, Eisenstadt conceptualises modernity in terms of the intersection of 'cultural visions of the world' and 'regulative frameworks of social life' (Eisenstadt, 2000b:1). Within the framework demarcated by these primary concepts, however, the idea of collective identity is acquiring increasing prominence. Eisenstadt in particular has introduced the notion (Eisenstadt, 1998) to refer to the ‘collective consciousness’ which provides the unassailable (but not immutable) assumptions about the nature of reality in a society, and attaches great importance to modes of collective identity as an analytical category, arguing that the processes of the construction and reproduction of collective identity are fundamental components of social life, and coextensive with human society.

In this context, the most relevant aspects of Eisenstadt’s concept of collective identity are its multifaceted and internally conflictual structure. He argues that the construction and reproduction of collective identity is effected though the promulgation and institutionalization of models of social and cultural order which are subject to ongoing and often competing processes of interpretations (Eisenstadt, 1998: 230-1), and insists that the collective identities which results from these multiple and open processes of interpretation are in turn multi-stranded. The details of Eisenstadt’s analysis of the main strands of collective identity are open to debate; as he sees it, collective identities combine ‘primordial’, ‘civic’ and ‘sacred’ codes for establishing the boundary between inside and outside. The primordial code focuses on components seen as naturally given – gender, kinship, race and the like - the civic code is constructed on the basis of familiarity with rules of conduct, traditions and social routines, and the sacral code links the collective subject to the realm of the sacred – whether it be God or Reason (Eisenstadt, 1998: 232). The internally multiple concept of collective identity that has emerged from Eisenstadt’s work has proved to be interpretively rich and analytically productive. His rich analyses of different combinations of these components have revealed the interpretive reach of such a concept of internally plural understanding of collective identity, and opened up fertile new avenues for analysis. The question of how such multiple strands are integrated in concrete identities, however, has not yet received much attention.

Part 2

I suggested at the outset that the philosophical hermeneutical concept of narrative identity has something to offer in relation to the theorisation of the internally multiple notions of identity at play in both of these theoretical domains. To explore its potential, it will be helpful to examine the work on this question that has been undertaken by Paul Ricoeur. One of the three main exponents of philosophical hermeneutics, Ricoeur’s broad ranging work offers a highly productive interpretation of the philosophical current inaugurated by Martin Heidegger, and brought into contact with the human sciences by Has-Georg Gadamers. ¹ Most relevant in this context, however, are his distinctive explorations of time, narrative and subjectivity. The analysis of narrative identity as a structure of language that he undertook in Time and Narrative (1984) is important in this regard, but it is its application to the problematic of personal identity in Oneself as Another (1992) that is the most relevant point of reference.

Ricoeur’s analysis of the linguistic structure of narrative identity is built on his discovery of a particularly productive feature of the narrative; the narrative, he argues, is a peculiarly dynamic structure of language which is able to synthesise heterogeneous elements into a singular totality. The narrative provides a series of mediations between the ‘disparate components of the action – intentions, causes, and chance occurrences – and the sequence of the story,’ and at the same time, between ‘pure succession and the unity of the temporal form.’ And a narrative identity, he argues, consists in a dialectic of concordance and discordance, in which concordance ultimately prevails. A narrative identity therefore has a particular kind of unity. The principle of order that presides over the ‘arrangement of the facts’ ultimately prevails over the reversals of fate (Ricoeur, 1992: 145-147), but the singular totality which is the outcome is not only heterogenous, but also encompasses diversity, variability, discontinuity and instability.

The implications of these features of the narrative structure for the identity of the self emerge when Ricoeur argues that the process of employment produces a parallel dialectic of concordance and discordance internal to the characters within the narrative. The character of a story is also an amalgam of disparate elements, and its identity is formed through the combination of multiple events and actions - through the narrative form - into a ‘temporal totality’ which is itself singular and distinguished from all others, but which remains permanently open to the addition of new and unforeseen events. The narrative requirement that concordance prevail over discordance means that the character is identified through the history of his or her life (Ricoeur, 1992: 147).

Ricoeur’s analysis of the process of the construction of narrative identity is also relevant here. In this regard, he insists that the creation of narrative iden-

¹ I have argued elsewhere that his work constitutes a ‘critical hermeneutics’ which sets it apart from Heidegger and Gadamer in important ways. See Ballantyne, G (2007) Creativity and Critique: Subjectivity and Agency in Touraine and Ricoeur, Leiden, Brill.
ties is partly a matter of discovery, but also partly a matter of (self-)construction. As he sees it, a narrative self-understanding is enabled and conditioned by the narratives proposed to us by our culture. The construction of a narrative identity involves ‘instruction by cultural symbols,’ whereby we apply to ourselves the plots we have received from our culture, and ‘try on’ the different roles assumed by ‘our favourite characters of the stories most dear to us’ (Ricoeur, 1991: 33). Those identifications with values, norms, ideals, models and heroes are, however, always open to innovation, and involve an active and imaginative process of selecting from, and transforming, culturally available models.

Ricoeur argues further that while the self-interpretations through which we construct narrative identities borrow from both history and fiction to organise and interpret life retrospectively, fiction plays both a crucial and a pre- eminent role. The features of the narrative form, which structure both genres, are most clearly evident in fiction (Ricoeur, 1992: 164), and it is from fiction above all that we gain the idea of narrative beginnings and endings that we use to help to stabilise the real beginnings formed by the initiatives we take, and to make sense of the experience of ending a course of action. The outcome, he insists, is that the self- construction of a narrative identity is an act of the productive imagination which results in an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience (Ricoeur, 1992: 162).

The relevance to the feminist debates we considered earlier of Ricoeur’s notion of narrative identity as a form which encompasses heterogeneity, instability and mutability is readily discernible. Unfolding within a hermeneutics of the self, it provides a plausible foundation for the task of conceptualising the interplay of unity and diversity internal to the subject. A narrative identity is a ‘singular totality’ which avoids the dangers involved in those approaches which dissolve identity and subjectivity into an incoherent series of events, while retaining a strong conception of the intrinsic heterogeneity of the self; in a narrative identity, multiple and contradictory elements can be incorporated into a singular totality which remains open-ended, because it is always possible to incorporate new elements into an ongoing story.

The concept of narrative identity is, however, no less relevant to the attempts of the theorists of multiple modernities to conceptualise internally plural collective identities. As Ricoeur has made clear, the concept of narrative identity is relevant to collective identities because, like individual identities, ‘the identity of a group, culture, people or nation is not that of an immutable substance, nor that of a fixed structure, but, rather, that of a recounted story’ (Ricoeur, 1995: 6). This conception of narrative identity does not contribute to debate over the structure and components of collective identity, but its emphasis on the temporal dimension of identity sheds new light on openness of its structure, and produces a highly fertile interpretive prism for the analysis of different empirical forms.

To begin with, the idea that the identity of a collectivity is that of a recounted story suggests that various components of identity are intertwined through narratives which are open-ended and fluid. To appreciate its interpretive power, however, we need to look at Ricoeur’s broader analysis of temporality. His analysis in this regard begins with the observation that the question of identity only becomes a problem in relation to time, as identity refers to what allows for reidentification of an individual over time. He insists, however, that the identity of human beings - individual or collective – cannot be reduced to the idea of ‘sameness.’

‘Sameness,’ he notes, is only one of the meanings of ‘identity,’ and using the Latin terms idem and ipse, he argues that ‘selfhood’ is itself a distinctive meaning of identity. More particularly, he argues that these meanings are reflected in the internally differentiated modes of permanence over time characteristic of the self. At one pole, the identity of the self approaches the idea of sameness. He refers to this dimension as ‘character,’ which consists in a set of lasting dispositions made up of habits and identifications with values, norms and ideals, which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the ‘same.’ However, although character has a certain stability, it is not immutable, because the sedimented habits and identifications which constitute it are acquired. At the other pole, there is a mode of permanence in time which more radically departs from the idea of sameness, because it exists in spite of change. Ricoeur refers to this mode of permanence in time as ‘self-constancy,’ evident above all in the phenomenon of keeping one’s word, ‘however much one’s desires, inclinations or opinions have changed’ (Ricoeur, 1992). Its significance lies in the fact that it constitutes a mode of permanence in time which encompasses change, and therefore cannot be reduced to sameness. As Ricoeur sees it, the ultimate significance of narrative identity lies in its capacity to tie together these two existential modes of permanence over time together in a meaningful way.

The distinction Ricoeur has made between idem and ipse identity provides criteria for distinguishing between exclusionary and aggressive, and open and tolerant forms of collective identity. From this point of view, for example, harmful forms of national identity are those in which distinctive traits are separated from the specificities of history and geography, and seen in terms of an immutable and innate national ‘character.’ It is such frozen collective
memories, Ricoeur argues, which give rise to intransigent nationalisms, while defensible modes recognise the fact that every transmitted history is open to, and stands in need of, ongoing revision, particularly when cultural or material conditions change.

At the same time, to recognise the open-endedness of the narrative structure of collective identities is to foreground the possibility of re-orienting destructive forms. Ricoeur’s analysis underlines the fact that, by shifting the focus from the past to the future, it is always possible to reinterpret once fixed narratives, and in the process generate new and less destructive interpretations of the past.

References


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Glenda Ballantyne began teaching sociology at Swinburne, Lilydale, in 2002. Her research interests include social movements, multiple modernities, identity and subjectivity and hermeneutics. Before moving to Swinburne, she taught and undertook a Ph.D at La Trobe University. She was a founding director of the feminist printing and publishing co-operative, Sybylla Press, and has been active in the women’s movement and local initiatives to foster intercultural dialogue and political involvement. Recent publications include Creativity and Critique: Subjectivity and Agency in Touraine and Ricoeur, Brill, Leiden, 2006/7.
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