

# SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF IDENTITIES

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■ **Abstract** In this chapter I review the social psychological underpinnings of identity, emphasizing social cognitive and symbolic interactionist perspectives and research, and I turn then to key themes of current work on identity—social psychological, sociological, and interdisciplinary. I emphasize the social bases of identity, particularly identities based on ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender, class, age, and (dis)ability, both separately and as they intersect. I also take up identities based on space, both geographic and virtual. I discuss struggles over identities, organized by social inequalities, nationalisms, and social movements. I conclude by discussing postmodernist conceptions of identities as fluid, multidimensional, personalized social constructions that reflect sociohistorical contexts, approaches remarkably consistent with recent empirical social psychological research, and I argue explicitly for a politicized social psychology of identities that brings together the structures of everyday lives and the sociocultural realities in which those lives are lived.

“Identity . . . is a concept that neither imprisons (as does much in sociology) nor detaches (as does much in philosophy and psychology) persons from their social and symbolic universes, [so] it has over the years retained a generic force that few concepts in our field have.”

(Davis 1991:105)

“[I]dentity is never a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality.”

(Bhabha 1994:51)

## INTRODUCTION

“Identity” is a keyword of contemporary society and a central focus of social psychological theorizing and research. At earlier historical moments, identity was not so much an issue; when societies were more stable, identity was to a great extent assigned, rather than selected or adopted. In current times, however, the concept of identity carries the full weight of the need for a sense of who one is, together with an often overwhelming pace of change in surrounding social contexts—changes in the

groups and networks in which people and their identities are embedded and in the societal structures and practices in which those networks are themselves embedded.

Social cognition and symbolic interaction, two of the prevailing perspectives in sociological social psychology, provide the theoretical underpinnings of traditional understandings of identity. In the past several decades, the concept of identity has been taken up more broadly, both within sociology and in other disciplines. In this essay, I review key questions and recent research on identity in social cognition and symbolic interaction, then take up key themes of current social psychological work on identity: identity and social inequalities particularly as expressed in race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other systems of social stratification; research on how these multiple identities intersect; identities based on locational indicators such as geography, place, cyberspace; questions of the (in)stability of identities; and the politicization of identities.

## SOCIAL COGNITION

Social cognition is a theory of how we store and process information (Fiske & Taylor 1991, Augoustinos & Walker 1995). Social cognition has close roots to psychology and a reliance on experimental laboratory methodologies. Several central assumptions underlie social cognitive theories of identity: that human cognitive capacities are limited; that, therefore, we process information as cognitive misers, streamlining information to manage the demands of everyday interaction; that, following from this need for cognitive efficiency, we categorize information about people, objects, and situations before we engage memory or inferential processes.

### Cognitive Structures

Cognitive schemas, abstract and organized packages of information, are the cognitive version of identities. Self-schemas include organized knowledge about one's self, the cognitive response to the question of identity: Who am I? These include the characteristics, preferences, goals, and behavior patterns we associate with ourselves. Group schemas (analogous to stereotypes) include organized information about social positions and stratification statuses, such as gender, race, age, or class. Because the social positions we occupy have immediate consequences for our sense of self, group schemas play a major part in processes of identification. Self and group schemas illustrate both advantages and disadvantages of categorization systems. They allow us to summarize and reduce information to key elements; thus, they also entail losing potentially valuable information. And, categorizations are almost always accompanied by systems of evaluation of some categories as better or worse. Schemas are not just perceptual phenomena; they can serve as explanatory devices and justifications of social relationships (Tajfel 1981). Thus, social identities are embedded in sociopolitical contexts.

Social identity theory focuses on the extent to which individuals identify themselves in terms of group memberships (Tajfel & Turner 1986). The central tenet of

social identity theory is that individuals define their identities along two dimensions: social, defined by membership in various social groups; and personal, the idiosyncratic attributes that distinguish an individual from others. Social and personal identities are thought to lie at opposite ends of a continuum, becoming more or less salient depending on the context. Deaux (1993), however, argues for an interplay between the two, suggesting they are not easily separable. Social identities provide status and enhance (or not) self-esteem. Because people are motivated to evaluate themselves positively, they tend to evaluate positively those groups to which they belong and to discriminate against groups they perceive to pose a threat to their social identity.

Empirical support has relied heavily on studies using the minimal group paradigm (Tajfel 1970), whereby people are classified into distinct groups on the basis of an arbitrary and trivial criterion under conditions free from other factors usually associated with group memberships. Under these minimal conditions, people do discriminate in favor of in-groups in allocation of various rewards. The most sociologically relevant recent studies have extended this tradition to socially meaningful groups and situations. Simon et al (1997), for example, demonstrate that being in a numerical minority (a predictor of identification in this tradition) does not lead to identification unless the in-group-out-group categorization is situationally meaningful.

The more positive, and more personally important, aspects of the self are likely to be bases on which a person locates her- or himself in terms of collective categories (Simon & Hastedt 1999), demonstrating the relationship between categorization and evaluation. This points toward more successful attainment of a positive social identity for those in dominant social groups. This process is a challenge for members of stigmatized, negatively valued groups, who may attempt to dissociate themselves, to evaluate the distinguishing dimensions of in-groups as less negative, to rate their in-group as more favorable on other dimensions, or to compete directly with the out-group to produce changes in the status of the groups. Much of this research accords considerable agency, both cognitive and material, to social actors.

One relevant line of research explores the psychological consequences of identifications with ethnic in- and out-groups. Fordham & Ogbu (1986), for example, suggest that academic failure among African-American students represents a desire to maintain their racial identity and solidarity with their own culture. High-achieving African-American children develop a "raceless" persona, but at the cost of interpersonal conflict and ambivalence; adoption of "raceless" behaviors and attitudes do have negative psychological consequences for African-American students (Arroyo & Zigler 1995). Direct impression management strategies intended to counter negative evaluations of their in-group also increase, one of many indicators of the interdependence of cognition and interaction. The focus on psychological consequences of identification speaks also to the interconnectedness of cognition and emotion. Thus, for example, individuals' prejudices may shape not only their own identifications but also their categorizations of others. Racially prejudiced individuals do appear to be more motivated to make accurate racial

categorizations, both in-group and out-group, than do nonprejudiced individuals (Blascovich et al 1997); accurate categorizations maintain clear boundaries between groups.

Strong identification with a group need not, in principle, be correlated with out-group hostility. Only under conditions of intergroup threat and competition are in-group identification and out-group discrimination correlated (Branscombe & Wann 1994, Grant & Brown 1995). Social identity theory maintains that it is in-group identification that causes out-group bias. Realistic conflict theory (LeVine & Campbell 1972), on the other hand, maintains that out-group threat and hostility lead to in-group identification. In a study of Black South Africans' ethnic identifications before and after South Africa's transitional election in 1994, Black African identification was related only to attitudes toward Afrikaans Whites, not whites in general or English Whites (Duckitt & Mphuthing 1998). Longitudinal analyses suggest that attitudes affected identifications, more consistent with realistic conflict than social identity theory, a useful caution to overly cognitive approaches to identification.

## Cognitive Processes

Cognitive processes are also implicated in the construction, maintenance, and change of identities. Attribution processes, that is, judgments of blame, causality, or responsibility, are particularly relevant. One key question is whether attributional patterns are biased in accord with intergroup identifications and allegiances. Many studies show a pattern of in-group favoritism such that positive behaviors of in-group members are attributed to internal factors and negative behaviors to external factors; some, but fewer, studies show out-group discrimination, that is, the opposite patterns of attributions about the behavior of out-group members (Islam & Hewstone 1993, and see Howard 1995). Consistent with social identity theory, when social categorizations are salient, these attributional patterns intensify (Islam & Hewstone 1993).

Cognitive structures and processes come together in Moscovici's (1981) theory of social representations. According to this perspective, knowledge structures are collectively shared, originating and developing via social interaction and communication (Augoustinos & Innes 1990). This approach reframes the concept of schemas, which have generally been seen as conservative and resistant to change. Given an increasing emphasis on social processes, one may expect to see continuing recasting of social schemas as more flexible and more grounded in social interaction.

Although the experimental tradition has been central to establishing the tenets of these theories, validation of these principles in sociologically meaningful contexts is crucial. Various of the studies cited here have been conducted in situations of real group memberships and real conflicts, underscoring the Spears et al (1997a,b) assertion that cognitive perception is meaningfully structured by groups and group life. One emphasis of this review is that cognitive and interactional processes are

intimately intertwined; identity management strategies are often used to manipulate group comparisons for purposes of social identifications (Doosje & Ellemers 1997).

## INTERACTIONISM

The basic premise of symbolic interaction is that people attach symbolic meaning to objects, behaviors, themselves, and other people, and they develop and transmit these meanings through interaction. People behave toward objects on the basis not of their concrete properties, but of the meanings these objects have for them. Because meanings develop through interaction, language plays a central part (see discussion below). Identities locate a person in social space by virtue of the relationships that these identities imply, and are, themselves, symbols whose meanings vary across actors and situations.

Interactionist approaches to identity vary in their emphasis on the structure of identity, on the one hand, and the processes and interactions through which identities are constructed, on the other. The more structural approach relies on the concept of role identities, the characters a person develops as an occupant of particular social positions, explicitly linking social structures to persons (Stryker 1980). Role identities are organized hierarchically, on the basis of their salience to the self and the degree to which we are committed to them, which in turn depends on the extent to which these identities are premised on our ties to particular other people. The second approach emphasizes the processes of identity construction and negotiation. Negotiations about who people are are fundamental to developing mutual definitions of situations; these negotiations entail self-presentation or impression management (Goffman 1959, McCall & Simmons 1978). Identities are thus strategic social constructions created through interaction, with social and material consequences.

This tradition articulates specific interactive mechanisms through which identities are produced (Cahill 1998). These processes are also always shaped by social hierarchies, as detailed in Goffman's ideas about how externally relevant status hierarchies are geared to "interactional cogs," for example, in his concept of hierarchical observation, the varying degrees to which people can control information others have about them. Members of total institutions are subject to compulsory visibility, and to "normalizing judgments," contrasting them to an ideal of a mentally healthy person, a law-abiding citizen, and so forth. Although these processes are most evident in total institutions, Goffman conceives these as more general, occurring in all institutional settings, even in informal interactions.

### Identity and Language

How is identity "done"? The interactionist literature on identity articulates the construction, negotiation, and communication of identity through language, both

directly in interaction, and discursively, through various forms of media (McAdams 1995). At the most basic level, the point is simply that people actively produce identity through their talk. Many studies (generally ethnographic) analyze identity work through everyday interaction. Identity talk is organized around two sets of norms, one concerning respect for situated identities and a commitment to basic moral precepts, and the second concerning ways in which people deal with failure to endorse these basic moral precepts, through denials of responsibility and other attributional tactics (Hunt et al 1994). Identity work is a micro-level performance of social (dis)order. Hunt & Miller (1997), for example, examine identity construction through interviews with sorority women, focusing on their talk about personal appearance. Their data reveal normative orders associated with dress and appearance; these women communicate, maintain, and repair identities through a "rhetoric of review" that provides ground rules for critical assessments of appearance. (For other examples, see MacPherson & Fine 1995, Freitas et al 1997.)

Many such studies focus on populations experiencing identity struggles, especially managing the stigma of social inequalities (see Goffman 1963, O'Brien & Howard 1998). Anderson et al (1994), for example, identify two distinct types of strategies used by homeless people to avoid stigmatization, many of which rely on language. In-group techniques used among street peers include drinking, cheap entertainment, hanging out, and positive identity talk. Out-group techniques, which reduce the impact of the stigma on public interactions with domiciled others, include passing (presenting an appearance that masks their homelessness), covering (minimizing the impact of their stigmatized status), defiance, and, sometimes, collective action, as in recent homelessness movements. Cherry's (1995) and Tewksbury's (1994) studies of people with AIDS also show how their respondents use language and identity performances to control and guide the social consequences of this discredited status.

In contrast to this emphasis on normative order, identity can be viewed as a more flexible resource in verbal interaction. Using conversational analysis, Antaki et al (1996) show how identities change as interaction proceeds, that is, how contextual variations shift identity claims. Their examples (drawn from tapes of natural English conversation between friends over drinks) show speakers not only avowing contradictory identities but also invoking both group distinctiveness and similarity. They argue strongly for working from participants' own orientations to identity, rather than analytically derived social categories. Verkuyten's (1997) study of how ethnic minority identity is presented in natural talk, based on focus groups of Turks living in the Netherlands, suggests the fruitfulness of this approach. Critiquing social identity theory, Verkuyten shows that people construct and cross borders of various categories in defining themselves; respondents did not use fixed categories, and differentiations were not always oppositional.

Language thus links the cognitive and interactive traditions. Hermans (1996) proposes development of a voiced conception of identity that integrates these traditions, a conception that points to collective voices (social dialects, professional

jargons, languages of generations and age groups) and facilitates greater recognition of the dynamics of dominance and social power. Rapley (1998) aptly illustrates this last point in his analysis of Australian MP Pauline Hanson's first speech to the Australian Parliament (in 1996). Rapley addresses three questions: how speakers construct themselves as representative of the audience they wish to influence, how the appearance of truth/fact is constructed in political rhetoric, and how Hanson constructed her case as representative of and credible for her audience. Rapley shows how Hanson treats identities as discursive resources in her strategic manipulation of identity claims to membership category entitlement, claims that contributed to the mobilization necessary to her election. Rapley makes the intriguing point that identity work and facticity work are mutually supporting, and often inseparable, components of successful mobilization discourse.

Other scholars in this tradition extend the terrain to other forms of discourse, especially visual media. Epstein & Steinberg (1995) analyze the feminist potential of the Oprah Winfrey show through deconstructions of the show in relation to two themes, a presumption of heterosexuality, and the use of a therapy discourse. They note the show's emphasis on individual pathology (rather than social processes). Hollander's (1998) analysis of a dating game show, "Studs," shows how both verbal and nonverbal gestures do the identity work of gender, most obviously, but also of heterosexuality, race (in the show's homogeneity), and class. In one of the few empirical studies of discourse about social class, Bettie (1995) analyzes the class dynamics of sitcoms. Bettie suggests that a pattern of recent shows, in which working class women are cast as lead characters and men are either absent or buffoons, reflects demographic shifts toward more women in poverty. Analyses of media portrayals acknowledge how language works together with nonverbal expressions and interactional contexts as part of the interactive construction of identities.

## Identities Across Time

With their emphasis on conservation of cognitive energy, theories of social cognition have underemphasized how identities shift over time. Interactionist approaches address this question more adequately. One model (Cote 1996) links identity shifts to historical cultural configurations, arguing that certain character types are encouraged by cultures through differential socialization practices. Helson et al (1995) address a more limited temporal range, contrasting identities of women raised in the 1950s with those raised in the 1960s. They report different identity types, which show differing degrees of stability over time. Another approach to the mutability of identities entails studying identity shifts during life transitions, periods of liminality. Karp et al (1998) report a great deal of interpretive effort by high school seniors preparing to leave home for college, as they anticipate affirmation of some identities, creation of new identities, and discovery of unanticipated identities. The authors also report racial similarities in concerns about identity and independence, but marked differences by social class, especially in the meaning of independence from family.

Another provocative approach to the instability of identities is to focus on what identities we distance ourselves from. Freitas et al (1997) examine who we say we are not, and whether such negative identities are merely an antithesis of identity or point to more complex identity ambivalences. They find complex patterns of identities that cut across dimensions such as age, temporality, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, raising questions about the primacy of so-called master statuses. Identity instability may also signify multiple, and contradictory, identity goals. Miles et al (1998) focus on consumerism as a process through which young people attempt to fit in their peer groups, but also to maintain individuality, buying some goods in order to "stick out." (The methodology of this study is exemplary, combining focus group interviews, individual questionnaires, and participant observations over a sustained time.)

## SOCIAL BASES OF IDENTITY

Much of the work on identity has emphasized single dimensions of social identities. In the sections that follow, I discuss the literatures on these separate dimensions, emphasizing the particularly nuanced work on racial and ethnic identity, and then I address the literature on intersections among identities.

### Ethnic Identities

Phinney (1990) reviews more than 70 studies of ethnic identity. The great majority of these articles assume that identity development is particularly complicated for those belonging to ethnic and racial minority groups, owing to negative societal stereotypes and discrimination. Phinney considers the major theoretical frameworks of ethnic identity formation (social identity, acculturation, and developmental theories), key components of ethnic identity (ethnic self-identification, a sense of belonging, attitudes toward one's own ethnic group, social participation and cultural practices), and empirical findings on self-esteem, self-concept, psychological adjustment, ethnic identity in relation to the majority culture, changes related to generation of immigration, ethnic identity and gender, and contextual factors. She argues for construction of reliable and valid measures of ethnic identity, for more work on the impact of ethnic identity on attitudes toward both one's own and other groups and on the role of contextual factors such as family, community, and social structures. Phinney also notes the lack of attention to mixed ethnic backgrounds; the decade after her review has seen markedly more attention to multiethnic and mixed-race backgrounds (see below).

Other reviews emphasize developmental processes and socialization into ethnic identity (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams 1990). Knight et al (1993) detail specific socialization practices, including mothers' teaching about the ethnic culture, parental generation of migration, mothers' cultural knowledge and orientation, language spoken, and demographic characteristics such as parents' education and



degree of community urbanization. In bringing together social interactions, cognitive beliefs and attitudes, and ecological and structural characteristics, this model exemplifies contemporary multilevel analyses of social identities.

One key question concerns the implications of ethnic identity for psychological adjustment. In another review article, Phinney (1991) explores the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem. Although findings do not add up to a clear picture, Phinney asserts that a strong ethnic identity, when accompanied by some adaptation to the mainstream, is related to high self-esteem. A related approach points to the importance of possible selves, the future-oriented components of self-schemas. Oyserman et al (1995) find markedly different racial patterns in what factors promote the construction of achievement-related possible selves: collectivism predicts these possible selves for African-American students, whereas for whites, individualism predicts the construction of such possible selves.

Another issue concerns the breadth of boundaries of ethnic in- and out-groups. Recent debates about inclusion of the category "Hispanic" as an ethnic group on the US Census, for example, assume this is a single, discrete category. Huddy & Virtanen (1995) show that Latinos differentiate their own subgroups from others but are no more likely than Anglos to differentiate among Latino subgroups to which they do not belong (here, Cuban Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans). Subgroup identification may be more pervasive than the development of loyalties to the in-group as a whole.

Consistent with this critique, many contemporary studies of ethnic identity cast ethnicity as fluid and ethnic boundaries as continually changing (though not without constraints). In her study of American Indian identifications, Nagel (1996) stresses ethnic identification as situational, volitional. Nagel characterizes ethnic identity as a dialectic between internal identification and external ascription, or, as Bhavnani & Phoenix (1994: 6) put it, "[identity] is the site where structure and agency collide." Nagel casts identity also as multilayered, with different identities activated at different times (e.g., for Native Americans—subtribal, tribal, supratribal-regional, or supratribal-national identities). Similarly, Espiritu's (1994) nuanced analysis asserts the construction of multiple and overlapping identities among Filipina/o Americans, as they rework dominant ideologies about their place in contemporary US society. She maintains that ethnic identification is a dynamic, more complex process than either assimilationist or pluralist models suggest.

Population shifts, especially immigrations, are a major instigator of changes in ethnic identities. One exemplary study examines the effects of relocation to the mainland US on Hawaiian students. Illustrating situational ethnicity, Ichiyama et al (1996) show shifts in ethnic identity with the shift in social context from majority to minority group status. Students who moved to the mainland showed a steady decline in identification with being Hawaiian; still, their affiliative behavior with other Hawaiians was not affected. Although ethnic identity may decline in intensity through exposure to stigmatized contexts, the need to participate in affirming social situations becomes a way of combatting these negative effects.

Waters (1994) addresses generational differences in pressures toward assimilation among black Caribbean immigrants to the United States. She finds three distinct patterns of identification: as Americans (presumably without ethnicity?), as ethnic Americans with some distancing from black Americans, or as immigrants unconnected to American racial and ethnic categories. Factors such as parents' class backgrounds, parents' social networks, type of school attended, and family structure influence these identifications. Waters contributes to the growing literature on intersections among identities in attending also to simultaneous class and ethnic identities and to gendered correlates of these patterns, noting that girls seem to live with greater restrictions and parental control than boys, but that girls have more leeway about choosing a racial identity than do boys. Anthias (1998) argues for more attention to history and context than such studies offer, maintaining that concepts of race and ethnicity are overly deterritorialized. For Anthias, "diaspora" is a more useful conceptualization of the identity implications of transnational migration.

Most of these studies assume individuals belong to a single racial or ethnic category. In contrast, recent work has begun to address a rapidly growing population in the United States: people with multiracial backgrounds. The number of biracial births in the 1990s is increasing at a rate faster than the number of monoracial births, and the "other" racial category on the 1990 US Census grew more than any other category. Root (1992, 1996; and see Zack 1995) has done a great deal of work exploring the complex racial and ethnic identities of those with mixed backgrounds. The debate over how to represent multiracial individuals on the census itself attests to Root's assertion that US history repeatedly shows ambivalence about recognizing multiracial people. Root articulates several patterns of identity negotiations: some actively identify with both (or more) groups, experiencing multiple perspectives simultaneously; others border-cross actively by shifting among different identities as they move among different social contexts; and yet others locate themselves on a border, experiencing "mestiza" consciousness (see discussion below).

All of the above models focus on racial and ethnic minorities. In the past several years scholars have begun to pay explicit attention to the racial and ethnic identity of whites. Rowe et al (1994) point out both that many whites do not have a racial identity and that white identity development may not fit a developmental stage model (a model used with many racial minority groups). Rowe et al focus on types of white racial consciousness, ranging from an unexamined racial identity to four types of achieved racial consciousness, moving from strong ethnocentrism to an integrative, morally responsible stance. Frankenberg (1993) proposes one of the most widely adopted models of white racial consciousness, beginning with "essentialist racism," emphasizing race difference as essential, biologically derived, and hierarchical; a discourse of essential sameness, or color-blindness (which she links with power evasiveness); and race cognizance, in which difference signals autonomy of culture and values. From this last perspective, social structures, not ascribed characteristics, generate racial inequalities (and see Helms 1994). In these

models, increasing maturity signifies increasing awareness of the conditions of oppression associated with race; these are thus explicitly politicized models of racial and ethnic identity, a marked shift from earlier social psychological approaches to this question.

## Sexual Identities

As Epstein (1987) observes, in a historical juncture in which group identity in general has assumed much importance, and where sexuality has become a central dimension of identity formation, it is not unlikely that gay and lesbian identities would arise. Sexual identity differs from racial identity in that awareness of one's self as a sexual being, and especially awareness of one's possible deviation from sexual norms, typically occurs later in one's life than awareness of one's race or ethnicity. Although implications of this difference have not been explored directly, most models of sexual identity are similar to those of racial identity. Cass (1983–1984) proposes a six-stage model, beginning with identity confusion, moving to comparison (with nonhomosexual others), to tolerance, and eventually to synthesis, including positive relationships with nonhomosexuals.

Kitzinger & Wilkinson (1995) propose a social constructionist model of lesbian identity, suggesting that the process is not one of coming to recognize what one always was, but rather one of recognizing, negotiating, and interpreting one's experiences. This model is framed in terms of discursive strategies and accounting mechanisms through which an identity change is accomplished and sustained, attesting to the central role of language and discursive processes in identity formation and maintenance. D'Augelli (1994) also proposes a social constructionist account but frames his model in a more explicitly sociopolitical context, referring to the social and legal penalties for overt expression of this sexuality. D'Augelli also emphasizes that people develop and change over the course of their life spans, and thus that sexual identity may be fluid at some points, more crystallized at others. Epstein's (1987) model of gay and lesbian identity is also explicitly sociopolitical, in keeping with his emphasis on gay social activism. Because a considerable stigma remains associated with this identity, Epstein observes, the attempts to assert its legitimacy and to claim that this is not grounds for social exclusion have the ironic effect of intensifying this identity. (For a general review of models of sexual identity, see Gonsiorek & Rudolph 1991.)

Cain (1991) emphasizes the complexities of the sociopolitical environment of sexual identities, analyzing how queer cultures respond to the behavior of passing, of hiding stigmatized sexual identities. Cain notes that in recent years, openness about one's sexuality has come in both professional literatures and subcultural communities to be seen as evidence of a healthy gay identity, and thus passing can be seen as problematic. He critiques the failure of such approaches to recognize the constraints of social factors, implying in his analysis that people manage information about their sexual identity, just as they manage information about other identities.

Analogous to the recent “discovery” of whiteness as an identity, heterosexuality has also begun to receive attention. In 1980 Adrienne Rich published an essay (later to become a classic) challenging the taken-for-grantedness of heterosexuality. More than a decade later, Wilkinson & Kitzinger (1993) solicited short reflections from a number of well-known feminists, many of them academic psychologists, about their heterosexuality. The responses indicated that “heterosexual” is not a popular label, and these respondents did not claim this as an identity. Most saw heterosexual and lesbian as points on a continuum, rather than recognizing their political asymmetry: as Wilkinson & Kitzinger (1993) assert, lesbian is an intrinsically politicized identity and heterosexuality is not. Jackson (1995) too notes that heterosexuality is rarely thought of in terms of identity or self-definition (and see Richardson 1996a,b). At the same time, many identities that are widely embraced are based in heterosexuality: wife, girlfriend, daughter, mother. Jackson points out the conundrum: to name oneself as heterosexual (as a woman) is to problematize heterosexuality and challenge its privileges, but for women, being heterosexual is not a situation of unproblematic privilege because the institution entails a hierarchical relation between women and men. Although these discussions do not address the heterosexual identities of men, for whom heterosexuality does bring privilege, there is a considerable recent literature in this arena (see Robinson 1996 for a helpful overview).

Herek (1995) connects heterosexual identities with an accompanying ideology, heterosexism, which denigrates and stigmatizes nonheterosexual forms of behavior, identity, relationship, or community. In his analysis of antigay violence, Herek maintains that heterosexist practices allow people to express values central to their self-concepts, in this case norms based on the institutions of gender and sexuality. Consistent with principles of social identity theory, Herek suggests that antigay violence may help heterosexist people feel more positive about being heterosexual. And, antigay assaults also provide a means for young men (by far the most common type of perpetrator) to affirm their own heterosexuality or masculinity, serving an ego-defensive function.

## Gender Identities

Gender identities have been explored more extensively than other social identities; thus I give less attention to this topic here and refer the reader to other reviews (Frable 1997, Howard & Alamilla 2001, Howard & Hollander 1997). Gender identities have been conceived either as gender self-schemas (Markus et al 1982), in the cognitive tradition, or as constructed achievements (West & Zimmerman 1987), in the interactionist tradition. In either case, gender identities, in the sense of organizing a sense of self around the perception one is female or male, and internalizing pre- and proscriptions of behaviors deemed culturally appropriate to these self-perceptions, are thought to be learned through early socialization and enacted and reinforced throughout the life span. Common to both perspectives is the assertion that gender is a social category and thus gender

identity is about more than personality. Ashmore (1990) details components of gender identity, and Gurin & Townsend (1986) explore the relationship of gender identity to gender-related ideologies. Most studies find few differences in the existence of gender identity. In terms of content, a quasi meta-analysis by Kroger (1997) finds gender differences in identity structure, content, developmental process, and context. In an empirical follow-up, Kroger reports that the domains of sexuality and family are somewhat more salient for women than men, but more generally, there are few differences in identity content (this may be due to reliance on a highly educated upper and upper-middle class sample). Much recent work emphasizes contextual influences on the relative salience of gender identities (Ely 1995, Thorne 1993).

## Class Identities

In a recent review Frable (1997: 154) reports: "With few exceptions, class as a meaningful identity is simply absent from the psychological literature." To the extent class identities have been considered in the social psychological literature, the emphasis tends to be on class identities in interaction with other identities (see below), and on contextual effects on the salience of class identities. Students from working-class (and ethnic minority) backgrounds negotiate their marginal status at elite academic institutions (Lopez & Hasso 1998, Stewart & Ostrove 1993), and later-generation immigrants are more likely than first-generation immigrants to have class identities similar to those prevalent in the U.S. (Hurtado et al 1994). Shockey's (1998) interviews with sex workers show a disjuncture between the subjective experience of class and these sex workers' occupational experiences and outcomes. Given the lack of attention to class in any regard, it is not surprising that there is virtually no research on class identities of those in privileged socio-economic circumstances. Suggestive of the kind of approach that would be useful is Eichstedt's (1998) analysis of the relationships between white and ethnic minority artists in a local art community, as they negotiated issues of authenticity in the production of ethnic art and assimilation and cultural integrity in the production and recognition of art.

## Identities of (Dis)ability

Relatively recently, scholars have begun to direct attention to identities based on physical and mental disabilities. Low (1996), for example, explores the experiences of college students with disabilities. Her interviews show these students' enduring dilemma, the desire to be perceived as "normal" while at the same time having to negotiate a disabled identity to deal with the various barriers to academic achievement. Many of the tactics they use to accomplish one goal conflict with accomplishment of the other.

Charmaz (1995) explores identity struggles imposed by severe illness and shows, in contrast, how people adapt their identity goals to respond effectively to their physical circumstances. Processes of bodily assessments and subsequent

identity tradeoffs sum to a surrendering to an identity as ill. Although Charmaz characterizes this as relinquishing control to the illness, at least one theoretical model suggests this is a way to exert secondary control, ceasing a fight to achieve an unachievable identity (Rothbaum et al 1982). Consistent with an increasing emphasis on identities as mutable and contextually sensitive is Charmaz' observation that these identity struggles are rarely a single journey; rather these individuals experience many iterations of these identity struggles.

Only within the past decade has there been explicit recognition of a "disability culture" (Scheer 1994). Scheer usefully outlines features that distinguish people with disabilities from other minorities; they do not often grow up in families with other members of this group, and they usually become a group member well into their lives, often in isolation, features they share with lesbians and gay men. These factors can motivate a search for a disability culture, with its attendant identity implications. Scheer notes that it is not clear whether other divisive social characteristics, such as race, gender, and class, have been muted by a common identification in disability culture. Gerschick (1998) speaks directly to this issue, in an analysis of the gendered dynamics of some forms of physical disability. Gerschick maintains that men with physical disabilities struggle with an hegemonic gender order defined by the masculinities of those who are able-bodied. Although many of his interviewees struggle for acceptance within these standards, some reject hegemonic masculinity and attempt to construct alternative identities.

## Age Identities

Being aged is unique as a social category; essentially everyone moves from not being in this group to being in it. Yet identities based on age have received little explicit attention from social psychologists. In one exception, Gatz & Cotton (1994) speak to the identity dynamics of aging: Age identities are both ascribed and achieved; the boundaries of group membership are permeable, but defined developmentally; and an influx of new members into the aged category is certain, with numbers increasing much more rapidly than those of other minority groups with permeable boundaries. The definition of "aged" is itself flexible, both culturally and personally.

The ubiquitous pattern is that the older people are, the less closely their subjective age identity matches their chronological age. The proportion of people who say they feel younger than their chronological age increased from 54% when they were in their forties, for example, to 86% when in their eighties (Goldsmith & Heiens 1992). Similarly, as people grow older, their definition of when old age begins becomes older and older (Logan et al 1992). Older adults even engage in greater stereotyping of all age groups than do younger people (Rothbaum 1983). One might conclude that greater self-esteem is associated with feeling younger; data suggest that life satisfaction is lower and stress is higher for those who see themselves as old (Logan et al 1992), but congruency between subjective and actual age leads to greater life satisfaction for older women (Montepare & Lachman

1989). Evolving more positive conceptions of aging should lead more older people to identify as old and to have more positive self-evaluations.

## INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

Analyses of identities based on single social positions, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, or age, have given way to a chorus of calls for analyses of how identities intersect (see O'Brien & Howard 1998). Most of the empirical studies focus on two co-existing, typically both subordinated, identities. (Most of these essays elide the question of whether models of two identities can be extended unproblematically to multiple intersections.) Most are ethnographic, qualitative studies. Many of these articles focus on race-ethnicity and gender (Reid & Comas-Diaz 1990). Shorter-Gooden & Washington (1996), for example, explore identities of adolescent African-American women, assessing the salience of various identity domains—race, gender, sexuality, relationships, career, religion, political beliefs. Racial identities were markedly strongly than other identities. Further, these women's racial identities were quite positive, one of many indicators that the societal context of racism does not necessarily translate into negative racial identities. Relationships, primarily with other women, were also a strong part of their identities. Woollett et al (1994) reveal fluid conceptions of ethnic identities operating across gender, among young mothers of Asian origin or descent, and speak also to developmental changes in these identities, associated with motherhood.

Takagi (1994) explores intersections between sexual and ethnic identities, here lesbian and gay Asian Americans. She offers a theoretical context for thinking about these intersections as, for example, in her analysis of how silence operates in both Asian American and queer history and experiences. Greene's (1998) parallel analysis of lesbian and gay African Americans points to cultural contradictions and the negotiations enactment of these identities entails; she stresses themes of family and ethnic group loyalty, the importance of parenting, a cultural history of sexual objectifications, the importance of community, and a cultural legacy of homophobia. Rust (1996) also addresses intersections between sexual and ethnic identities, focusing on bisexuality. She cautions that while developing an identity as bisexual might be positive for some racial or ethnic backgrounds, it may not be so for others, and she focuses on how bisexuals in marginalized racial and ethnic groups manage these interacting oppressions.

Beckwith (1998) also addresses conflicts between two identities, here between class and gender as experienced by working class women striking against a coal firm in Virginia. In this case, the collective identity of women was subsumed in the context of a wider working-class collective identity. Except for an initial all-women strike, no other all-women events were organized, owing to the UWMA's control of strike activity, a reminder of structural constraints on identity enactment. Beckwith moves toward theorization of how multiple identifications might intersect, and she

argues that collective identity generally emerges in response to specific social contexts and struggles.

Indeed, several different theories of intersectionality suggest that politically motivated identity work generates attention to intersecting identities. Crenshaw (1997) too argues that political investments and commitments motivate analyses of intersectionality. She sees intersectionality as oriented toward recognition of political coalitions among groups, explicit attempts to resist all forms of subordination, rather than relying on particular positions of advantage to resist only the subordination that directly affects a particular group. This emphasis on political realities underscores a prominent theme, that analyses of intersectionality must take into account structural inequalities and the recognition of multiple (dis)advantages. At the same time, and in tension with an emphasis on structural inequalities, much of the emerging theory of intersectionalities shows the influence of a weak form of post-modernism, in its recognition of multiple, fluid identities (see discussion below). The study by Freitas et al (1997) of negative identities, for example, problematizes the notion of a unified, rational self and argues for the need to negotiate border spaces, to conceptualize identities and identity work as tenuous, fragile, elastic, rather than as fixed and dichotomous. The empirical work points to a lack of closure between one master status and another, between previous and future identities.

## IDENTITIES AND SPACE

Space, both geographic and virtual, is another recent basis of identities, a direction that attests to the interdisciplinary character of recent research on identities. Some studies focus on literal space; Cuba & Hummon (1993a, 1993b) consider "place identities," that is, identities based on a sense of being at home. Key questions concern the effects of mobility on place affiliation and intersections between place identities and transitions in the life course. Their empirical study of immigrants' place identities points to generational differences in people's relationships to place. Lindstrom (1997) adds a structural element, considering intersections of place stratification and place identity. One's home address, he argues, is a marker of values and socioeconomic position. Espin (1995) connects questions of spatial identity and spatial dislocations to intersections with national, gender, and sexual identities, exploring how struggles about acculturation center on immigrant women's sexual behaviors and gender performances. She suggests that the crossing of borders through migrations may provide women the space to cross other boundaries, here boundaries of sexuality and gender. These essays address those who have some degree of choice about where they live. Although presumably those who have less choice, or those who do not have homes, undoubtedly have a place identity, how these dynamics differ when this identity is chosen or not remains to be explained.

Moving to a less literal conception of space, Ruddick's (1996) analysis of reactions to a public crime suggests that public space is not simply a passive



arena for predetermined social behaviors but rather an active medium for the construction of objective and subjective identities. McCorkel (1998) analyzes a markedly less literal conception, "critical space." Analyzing women's responses to the intense social control of a drug treatment program for women in prison, McCorkel points to the construction of critical space, resident-initiated subversions of formal structure, based centrally in interactions among residents. McCorkel suggests that most people construct critical spaces in their lives in order to distance themselves from the constraints some identities pose for their personal sense of self.

Cyberspace is another spatial arena in which questions of identity arise. Explorations of these issues in cyberspace ask whether people play with identities, adopting virtual, online identities different from their offline identities, when interacting in virtual, therefore invisible, space. That is, do people try to "pass" in new identities when they cannot be monitored? Kendall (1998a,b, and see O'Brien 1999) suggests the answer is no. In two years of participant observation in a multi-user domain, Kendall shows that people persist in seeking essentialized groundings for the selves they encounter and the selves they offer. Where passing does occur, it is most prominent with gender, but even "gender-switchers" distance themselves from their online experiences of differently gendered identities.

McKenna & Bargh (1998) take an opposite tack but come up with a similar answer. While Kendall's informants are mostly young white men, McKenna & Bargh ask whether Internet participation offers opportunities for those with culturally stigmatized identities, here people with marginalized sexual and ideological orientations. Internet newsgroups allow these people to interact anonymously with similar others; membership in these newsgroups becomes an important part of identity. Those who participate most frequently experience greater self-acceptance and are more likely to come out about their identity to family and friends. Both studies attest to a close correspondence between online and offline identities and to a persistent preference for stable identities.

## IDENTITY STRUGGLES

### Nationalisms

Recent years have seen increasing attention to struggles over national and ethnic identities, mirroring the real world identity-based ethnic conflicts that have had a resurgence in the 1990s. Comas-Diaz et al (1998) offer a comparative analysis of ethnic identity and conflict in three Latin American nations, Guatemala, Peru, and Puerto Rico. Arguing that ethnic conflicts are intimately related to ethnic identities, they link an explicit social psychology of liberation to indigenous social psychologies. Rouhana & Bar-Tal (1998) ask why some ethnonational conflicts are more entrenched than others, using the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to argue that societies in particularly intractable conflicts form societal beliefs that help them cope with, but also perpetuate, these conflicts. They also speak to ways in

which social psychological work on social identities can change such beliefs, thus contributing to immediate societal concerns.

The influence of sociopolitical forces is central to national and ethnic identity struggles. Perera & Pugliese (1998) chronicle the active attempts by the Australian Government and majority culture to impose particular ethnic definitions on the Aboriginal population, and Aboriginal responses, claiming their own conceptions of their ethnic identities. These have been both cultural and material campaigns, the latter primarily battles over land ownership. The authors argue persuasively that Australia's stated policy of multiculturalism is intelligible only within a monocultural framework that imposes the democratic Constitutional government and a national language. These struggles, of course, are analogous to those between American Indians and the US Government (Nagel 1996).

Not all debates about national and ethnic identities have been as conflicted as the Australian-Aboriginal or Israeli-Palestinian cases. The formation of the European Community provides a real-world context in which to study identities and social change. Breakwell & Lyons' (1996) edited collection addresses processes and expressions of national identifications, and their significance for understanding sociopolitical actions in various European contexts. These articles range from explorations of current trends in Spanish nationalism within the context of the historical connection between Spain and its American colonies (Torregrosa 1996), to analysis of how the Scottish National Party has attempted to make the concept of Scottishness relevant to Scots while undermining the relevance of Britishness (successfully, witness the establishment of a national Scottish Parliament) (Hopkins & Reicher 1996), to Ruzza's (1996) discussion of the attempts of the Lega Lombarda movement to promote cultural, economic, and political self-determination among Northern Italians. The tendency to adopt a European identity varies with the prior power of the nation: British respondents perceive European integration as a threat and show almost no evidence of a sense of European identity, whereas Italian respondents show a stronger European identity than an Italian identity (Cinnirella 1997).

## Social Movements

Identity struggles may also generate explicit social movements. One influential theory of social movements hypothesizes a collective identity that motivates group action (Taylor & Whittier 1992). This identity requires a perception of membership in a bounded group, consciousness about that group's ideologies, and direct opposition to a dominant order. Simon et al (1998) used an identity approach in studying a movement of the elderly in Germany and the gay movement in the United States. Both showed two different pathways to willingness to participate in collective action, one based on cost-benefit calculations, the other on collective identification as an activist. Bernstein (1997) reveals a strategic dimension to the use of identities in collective action, in her analysis of when and how identities that celebrate or suppress difference from the mainstream are used in strategic collective action about gay rights.

Epstein (1987) also explores identity issues in gay activism; he equates his model of gay and lesbian identity (discussed above) with an ethnic identity. Both combine affective ties to a group with the pursuit of sociopolitical goals; both groups direct activity toward the terrain of the state; both are progressive, with a goal of advancing the group position; lacking structural power, both groups press demands by appealing to and manipulating hegemonic ideologies; and both groups tend toward a local character organized around a specific geographic space or community. This is an excellent summary of the parameters of contemporary identity more generally, especially in intersection with society.

## POLITICIZING A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF IDENTITIES

Several recent articles have made significant theoretical contributions to an explicitly politicized social psychology of identity and provided analysis of how identity processes intersect with the (re)production of social inequalities (see Bhavnani & Phoenix 1994). Langman (1998) analyzes how identity constructions serve hegemonic ends; legitimating ideologies construct identities that obscure an awareness of injustice. She asserts, accurately, that relatively little scholarship has been devoted to understanding the ideological constitution of the self, the social production of identities, and the legitimation of inequalities. Langman identifies key moments of child development as sites of colonization, a more politicized understanding of socialization. She identifies particular desires as key forces in shaping identity: to seek attachments to others; the pursuit of recognition and dignity; feelings of agency and empowerment; avoiding fear and anxiety. While each of these motivations has been an important locus of social psychological research, Langman theorizes how each is harnessed through socialization to ensure dependable citizens. At the same time, she is careful not to portray individuals as passive robots.

Collective identities generally do provide social and emotional compensations for subordinate statuses that sustain systems of inequality. Wolf (1994) explores this theme, theorizing that people in subordinate social positions attempt in a sort of reality-construction process to translate coercive relationships into dependency relationships, through maneuvering their oppressors into accepting obligations toward them. Her empirical analyses of responses of Japanese Americans during the Relocation, African-American slaves, and nineteenth century European-American women, show that the more successful they are, ironically, the more entrenched they become in these dependent relationships.

## DECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES

Much of the literature discussed above makes several key assumptions: Identities have an intrinsic, essential content, defined by a common origin or a common structure of experience, and often, both. When identity struggles arise, they

generally take the form of redefining negative images as positive, or of deciphering the “authentic” identity. An alternative approach emphasizes the impossibility of authentic identities based on a universally shared experience or origin (Grossberg 1996); identities are relational, defined by their difference from something, processual, and multiple.

Hall (1996, Hall & Du Gay 1996) notes that this deconstructive critique does not supplant inadequate concepts with “truer” ones, and thus that there is no way to avoid thinking about the former concepts. He argues that identity is such a concept—something that cannot be thought about in the “old way” but without which certain key questions cannot be thought about at all. For Hall, identity moves away from signaling a stable core of self, to becoming a strategic, positional concept: “identities are points of temporary attachments to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall 1996: 6).

Key principles underlying this approach stand in marked contrast to much of the traditional literature. Fragmentation emphasizes the multiplicity of identities and of positions within any identity. Hybridity is also key, evoking images of liminality and border-crossings in which a subaltern identity is defined as different from either of several competing identities. *Disapora* is another key idea, resonant with the discussion above of geography and identity. *Diaspora* emphasizes not just transnationality and movement, but also political struggles to “define the local . . . as a distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement” (Clifford 1994: 308).

Anzaldúa’s (1987) early discussion of these ideas in *Borderlands/La Frontera* has been especially influential; she emphasizes the construction of a mestiza consciousness, a destabilization of a unified identity, expressed in the language of fluidity, migration, postcolonialism, and displacement. Bauman (1996) connects this conception of identity directly to the conditions of postmodernity. Bauman paints a dismal picture, asking what chance of morality or of engaged citizenship, such a world allows. Hall, Bauman, and Grossberg all seek ways to articulate a notion of democratic citizenship that can be effective in a postmodern world. They focus on questions of agency and possibilities for action, and they argue for a conception of identity based in people’s existence in specific communities and contexts. Identities become the problem of citizenship.

As an example of what sorts of questions this more explicitly politicized approach might point toward, one consistent critique of social cognition takes issue with the seemingly natural character of categorization and with the seeming obviousness of which dimensions become bases for categorization. Asserting that a category “race” would not exist without racist ideology, Hopkins et al (1997) argue that racialized categories are socially constructed, and they argue for a social psychology that focuses on the social processes through which categories are constructed, including the power relationships and social practices that affect who is able to act on the basis of their category constructions, make them heard, and impose them on others. As empirical support, they analyze the speech of a police officer accused of expressing racist views in a public school, using this linguistic analysis to reveal the social construction of racialized categories.

Regardless of where one aligns one's self in terms of these models of identity, there is no question that contemporary research reveals and analyzes various crises of confidence. One response to these crises is an increased interest in authenticity, as a commitment to self-values. Erickson (1995) argues that authenticity has captured both cultural and sociological imaginations, partly due to the power of images and mass media. Maintaining that postmodernism does not do away with selves and identities but rather directs attention to how they are constructed, Erickson emphasizes meanings—what it means, for example, to be white, female, or gay—and the challenge of achieving authenticity and meaning when most human actors experience simultaneously a multiplicity of relationships and identities. She also argues that members of oppressed groups are more likely to confront “problems” of authenticity, being more often faced with dilemmas that require them to choose between acting in accord with their self values or in accord with the expectations of powerful others. Erickson argues for a conception of self that is both multidimensional and unified, both emotional and cognitive, both individual and social—a notion not so far afield from traditional conceptions of identity. The postmodern element is that authenticity is no longer a question of being true to self for all time, but rather of being true to self in context or self in relationship.

## IDENTITIES TO COME

Attempting to derive an overall picture from these many and diverse approaches to understanding identities is impossible. These are several strong traditions of theory and research on identities, traditions that co-exist but rarely come together. The more traditional social psychological literature reflects a modernist approach to identities, casting them as specifiable, measurable, ordered, and, in some sense, rational. Whether from a cognitive or an interactionist perspective, or perhaps most fruitfully, from some synthesis of the two, this approach sees identities as generally stable, although sensitive to social context, as relevant both for individuals and for social groups, as having both cognitive and affective components, as cognitive structures but also resources available for interactional negotiations, and as motivators for social action.

The deconstructionist literature reflects a postmodernist approach to identities, casting them as multiple, processual, relational, unstable, possibly political. Although this identity is elusive, Hall's (1996) comment that certain questions cannot be thought about without the concept of identity is well taken. What those questions address is the possibility of agency and social action, questions that have not been central in social psychology. In anticipating future directions, it is difficult not to argue for some degree of interchange among these seemingly unconnected literatures. There is room, indeed need, for studies of social identities that are both theoretically and methodologically rigorous, in touch with the contemporary world, and directed toward advancing both theory and progressive social action. Frible (1997) concludes her review of research on social identities with a call for

“seeing people as whole,” referring to the need to address gender, racial, ethnic, sexual, and class identities as multiple identities of whole people. In the same vein, seeing people as whole means recognizing that both our everyday lives and the larger cultures in which we operate shape our senses of who we are and what we could become. For most social actors, the details of our everyday lives are relatively predictable and orderly. The details of our larger cultural environments may be markedly more unsettled and shifting. Both contexts are part of our experiences of identities. In anticipating the next century’s approaches to identities, then, we might look to analyses that bring together both the structures of everyday lives and the sociocultural and sociopolitical realities in which those lives are lived, but without imposing a false coherence on that synthesis.

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