

Reflexive and Non-reflexive Identity Perceptions: Finding a Balance

KATHARINA HAMETNER
University of Vienna

AMREI C. JOERCHEL
University of Vienna

Various concepts of identity turn their attention to the reflexive and directly accessible aspects of identity. To a certain degree this leads to the exclusion of implicit and not reflexively available parts of identity. The importance of these aspects is nevertheless decisive for a holistic approach to the phenomenon of identity. Starting from these considerations this article argues for a position that puts these marginalized aspects of identity at the center of attention. Furthermore it proposes a way of discussing the concept of identity in which the reflexive and the habitual parts are united. Various theories are analyzed in regard to these two aspects, where the positive as well as the problematic facets are briefly highlighted in a search for a better understanding of what a combined approach would have to take into consideration.

The notion of identity has a long standing history of debate between scientists and philosophers about it. Many concepts within the identity discussion turn their attention to the reflexive and directly accessible aspects of identity. To a certain degree this leads to the exclusion of implicit and non-reflexively facets of identity that are not readily available. Actions and habitual interactions of individuals in their intentional worlds (Shweder, 1990) are often neglected. Furthermore, while the socio-cultural perspective emphasizes the fact that action is mediated and cannot be separated from the milieu in which it is carried out (Wertsch, 1991), we question identity concepts which mainly focus on reflexive and conscious aspects of the self. Situated and non-reflexive aspects of the self are often neglected in psychological theorizing of the self, and yet, the importance of them is nevertheless necessary for a holistic approach to the phenomenon of identity.

Starting with these considerations this article argues for a position that places marginalized aspects of identity such as non-reflexive and situated facets of the self at the center of attention. By discussing some contemporary theories of identity within the social scientific literature, this article asserts a concept of identity which unites the reflexive as well as the habitual facets.

IDENTITY AND REFLEXIVNESS—CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Identity is often seen as the attempt to answer the following questions: Who am I? and Who are you? (Mummendey & Simon, 1997). These questions already refer to a reflexive structure of many identity concepts which have traditionally been the main focus in identity theories. Such an understanding of identity is questioned here, as it suggests that the question of identity is something you can answer verbally, explicitly, and

reflexively. Similarity and difference (Mummendey & Simon, 1997), as well as continuity (the experience of remaining the same person over the course of time) and coherence (the aspiration to be an entity of one person) (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2004), for example, seem to be very important in such theories. Furthermore self reflexivity, which can be defined as the possibility to be subject and object at the same time and to admit a relationship to oneself (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2004) has been discussed profusely.

In recent identity theories the terms *identity construction* and *identity work* increasingly have gained relevance. Especially Keupp et al. (1999) emphasize that identity is not something that a person has since birth or something that one could attain once and for all, but something that must be constructed in daily identity work. Identity in this case is not secure, but a temporary state.

While constructionist theories—such as Keupp et al. (1999)—have transcended the static and reified views of identity, other problems arise. Despite the emphasis on constructing identity and the apparent freedom of choice, it must not be forgotten that this process of constructing is limited by power structures and collective discriminations which influence and determine chances and possibilities of identity development. Ha (2004) warns us that in post-modern theory the material and social premises such as capital and education sometimes are neglected by postulating a free field of constructing. Also the theory of Keupp et al. (1999) has to a certain extent not been able to avoid these pitfalls which are typical in postmodern theories. While Keupp et al. note at the beginning of their book that identity work cannot be made thematic without mentioning the specific historical conditions of identity construction, it is precisely these aspects which receive not enough concrete attention within descriptions of identity work processes.

Keupp et al. (1999) state that identity work is primarily the permanent process of linking-up—connecting matters of time, content, and life-world (*Lebenswelt*). In the process of linking-up a person has to cope with the permanent tension between the internal and external world and their differences. A definitive fit between the internal and external world is not within reach—we are only able to approach a subjectively defined degree of ambiguity (Keupp et al., 1999).

Keupp et al. (1999) call the products of identity work the *identity parts* (*Teilidentitäten*) the *feeling of identity* (*Identitätsgefühl*) and the *central biographical narratives* (*Kernnarrationen*). The idea of such identity parts proposes that one person may have many different parts of identity in relation to the different parts of daily life (e.g. identity as a worker, as a student, as a family member, in an ethnic group). All the currently valid cognitive, social, emotional, body, and product-oriented standards are included in these identity parts (Keupp et al., 1999). The benefit of such an idea—identity parts—is that it allows for a plurality in identity, which is necessary in a multifaceted world. Other interesting aspects of Keupp et al.'s (1999) theory are the central biographical narratives which represent an ideology of one's self. They can be seen as an attempt to communicate a sense of one's self and one's self's life. Including narratives in the process of identity work is an important point because the concept of central biographical narratives focus on the *process* of narration, and in turn stress the fact that identity is a procedural phenomenon.

Nevertheless the theory of Keupp et al. (1999) returns to a slightly reified and unified viewpoint of the self with the notion of feeling of identity (*Identitätsgefühl*)—similar to a condensation and generalization of all the biographical experiences of one's person. It consists of all the identity parts and themes of one's self. Thus Keupp et al.'s theory has eventually made use of a single comprehensive structure which is superior to the various identity parts and undermines the conception of a fragmented identity.

The concept Keupp et al. (1999) describe focuses on reflexive self construction. Identity work—as a process of linking-up—is a self reflexive act, in which a person tries to formulate who he or she is and wants to be. In this process the reflexive composition of narratives plays an important role. Identity from this point of view is the temporary product of self reflection. To a certain degree this approach neglects the non-conscious practical knowledge and the implicit orientations which we consider important parts of identity.

THE DIALOGICAL SELF THEORY—A STEP BEYOND CONSTRUCTIONALISM

One step closer to transcending the reified and static notion of the self is the theory of the dialogical self. First proposed in 1992 by Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, this theoretical framework is built on the intersection of the Jamesian distinction between 'I' and 'Me,' and on Bakhtin's polyphonic novel. The result is a conception of the self that is a dynamic multiplicity with a narrative necessity. More precisely, the self is described as a dynamic multiplicity of *I* positions that are in constant dialogical interaction in an imaginal landscape (Hermans et al., 1992). According to this conception, the I has the ability to move, as in space, from one position to another. As the I fluctuates from sometimes even opposing positions, it has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice which enables the possibility of dialogical relations to be established between various positions. The various voices function like interacting characters in a story which take on a life of their own and thus also a certain narrative necessity.

The self is understood to be social as various social others may occupy positions within the multivoiced self. This phenomenon is also transferred to bodily things as James' view of the Me, and is equated with the self-as-known, which is composed of the empirical elements considered as belonging to one's self. As Hermans (2001) has noted, James

"concluded that the empirical self is composed of all the person can call his or her own, 'not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and his work, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account.'" (James, 1890, p. 291, as cited in Hermans, 2001, p. 244)

Such an extended self transcends the constructionalist perspective of the self in that each of these positions is necessarily situated and "embedded in a historical context with deep implications for both the form and the content of narratives and dialogical processes" (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 29). Thus, the theory of the dialogical self has succeeded in highlighting how the self is situated in pointing to the mediated aspect of action as well as the dynamic and ongoing process of self-formation. As the self moves and acts within a certain milieu, its action—in this case the dialogical process—is

mediated accordingly. Moreover, as various positions are in constant negotiation and debate, the structure of the positions-repertoire is constantly fluctuating and changing according to time and situation. The dialogical self theory is, however, focused very heavily on the metaphor of voice (Ruck & Slunecko, 2006) and thus lacks the emphasis on habitual action and practices. While dialogue and narrative certainly play a major role in identity work, as we have already pointed out with Keupp et al. (1999), the habitual aspects of the self should not be neglected either. The following will focus on the more subtle non-reflexive and habitual facets of the self.

A FOCUS ON THE PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE—BOURDIEU'S HABITUS THEORY

Bourdieu's (1979, 1987, 1997) habitus theory focuses on non-reflexive and practical knowledge. It marks a paradigm shift from the perception of social practice as result of conscious decisions to social practice conceived as something that is based on incorporated and non-conscious procedures (Krais & Gebauer, 2002).

The *habitus* is an overarching principle which mediates between the concrete life conditions and the practices. It is a set of dispositions that creates and classifies practices at the same time through its specific constitution as a *modus operandi*. It structures perception, cognition and the acts of a person (Schwingel, 2000). The habitus is a creative principle which produces—in co-action with new situations—consistently new practices (Krais & Gebauer, 2002). In doing so, the habitus does not cause complete determination but creates a field of possible practices, which are relatively unforeseeable, but nevertheless of limited variety (Schwingel, 2000). These practices produced by the habitus are comprised of different behavior—for example, body techniques (*Körpertechniken*) such as walking, eating, and gesticulating. Moreover, they are constructions and evaluations of the social world, such as the taste for art, sports, and food. The habitual dispositions are implicit and not necessarily part of reflexive thought processes. They are practical knowledge which is not located in the consciousness and only is partially accessible by it.

The habitus is furthermore an *opus operatum*. It is not inborn, but something that is made. The habitus develops through experiences with the social world and the conditions of life, and can be modified through new experiences (Krais & Gebauer, 2002). The specific form of the habitus thus accrues from the conditions of existence. In this process necessities transform to strategies and compulsions to preferences (Bourdieu, 1987). The production of the habitus reproduces, to a certain degree, the conditions from which it emanates. In doing so the past affects—through the practices which are an actualisation of the past—the future (Bourdieu, 1979).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus focuses on the collective aspects. Nevertheless the individual habitus is also brought to attention. The individual habitus is the individual acquisition of possibilities which are given by the collective habitus (Schwingel, 2000). The specific formation of the field of possibilities given by the personal biography constitutes individual differences. Due to the fundamentally similar conditions of existence within a social class, homogeneity of the habitus can be detected at any given point in time (Bourdieu, 1997). The homogeneity causes unison of the practices without an explicit coordination by the acting subjects.

AN ATTEMPT OF SYNTHESIS—REFLEXIVE AND HABITUAL PARTS OF IDENTITY

If we look at what was elaborated so far, it seems that everything we do as well as the way we are is defined by two parts: the reflexive and conscious part and the non- or pre-reflexive habitual part. Can these two components be captured with the one term of identity?

Hartmut Rosa (2002) defines identity as not only constituted of a reflective part, but also of a practical part. This practical part consists of actions, preferences and distinctions, and is understood as the simply *lived* answer to the question who one is. Here the *lived* answer is distinguished from the *reflective* answer to the question of identity. In his opinion our identity develops and conserves itself to a high degree in what Bourdieu (1997) calls habitus. Following this assumption identity can be understood as something that is only partly accessible for reflection. It exists only partly in the form of explicit and conscious thoughts and assumptions. The other part of identity—and from Rosa's point of view the fundamental part—is included implicitly in our practices and always needs practical reinforcement in concrete actions (Rosa, 2002). Both components are part of a reciprocal relationship: the reflexive opinions and interpretations on the one hand and the habitual practices, schemes of perception, and schemes of evaluation on the other hand, which influence and change each other simultaneously.

A similar perspective is taken by Renn and Straub (2002). These authors especially focus on the act of narrating. Renn and Straub point out that the autobiographical narrative is something which is at most only partly understood if it is conceived as only a reflexive description of one's life. Narrating is not the presentation of a complete and reflexive identity. It is a pre-reflexive act in which the creation of identity begins and takes place. Therefore identity is understood not as something substantial, which can be owned or possessed, but as implicit and operational knowledge which can only partly be transferred into an explicit self conception (Renn & Straub, 2002). The narrative idea of identity does not regard identity as something which is completed or ever able to be completed (Kraus, 2002). A final state cannot be achieved. From this point of view identity undergoes constant fluctuation and change (Kraus, 2002; Renn & Straub, 2002).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to demonstrate that while identity theories have in the past focused on reflexive aspects of the self with a reified and static conception, the self should be conceived as dynamic and inclusive of non-reflexive habitual aspects. As we have shown with Hermans et al. (1992), Bourdieu (1979, 1987, 1997), Rosa (2002), Renn and Straub (2002) and Kraus (2002), more and more social scientists strive to conceive the self as both fluid, permeable, flexible and process oriented, as well as non-reflexive and situated within a habitus. While the reflexive and subjective nature of the self is an important and relevant aspect which should not be dismissed in favor of a purely non-reflexive conception of the self, this article emphasized the non-reflexive facets and the habitus as aspects that have long been neglected within the psychological endeavor. Instead of arguing for one aspect of the self (static, reflexive, and finalized) or another (permeable, fluid, process-oriented, and non-reflexive), both aspects should be taken seriously and should be incorporated into theories of identity. Both aspects

together comprise the self in fundamental ways and none should be dismissed in favor of the other. Thus, it is a combination of both sides which we propose here.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1979). *Entwurf einer Theorie der Praxis auf der ethnologischen Grundlage der kabyliischen Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Bourdieu, P. (1987). *Die feinen Unterschiede. Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Bourdieu, P. (1997). *Sozialer Sinn. Kritik der theoretischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Ha, K. N. (2004). *Ethnizität und Migration Reloaded. Kulturelle Identität, Differenz und Hybridität im postkolonialen Diskurs*. Berlin: wvb.
- Hermans, H. J. M. (2001). The dialogical self: Toward a theory of personal and cultural positioning. *Culture & Psychology*, 7(3), 243-281.
- Hermans, H. J. M., Kempen, H. J. G., & Van Loon, R. J. P. (1992). The dialogical self: Beyond individualism and rationalism. *American Psychologist*, 47, 23-33.
- Keupp, H., Ahbe, T., Gmür, W., Höfer, R., Mitzscherlich, B., Kraus, W., & Strauss, F. (1999). *Identitätskonstruktionen. Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.
- Krais, B., & Gebauer, G. (2002). *Habitus*. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Kraus, W. (2002). Falsche Freunde. Radikale Pluralisierung und der Ansatz einer narrativen Identität. In Straub, J., & Renn, J. (Eds.), *Transitorische Identität. Der Prozesscharakter des modernen Selbst* (pp. 159-186). Frankfurt/New York: Campus.
- Lucius-Hoene, & G., Deppermann, A. (2004). *Rekonstruktion narrativer Identität. Ein Arbeitsbuch zur Analyse narrativer Interview*. Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. (2nd edition).
- Mummendey, A., & Simon, B. (1997). Selbst, Identität und Gruppe: Eine sozialpsychologische Analyse des Verhältnisses von Individuum und Gruppe. In A. Mummendey, & B. Simon (Eds.), *Identität und Verschiedenheit. Zur Sozialpsychologie der Identität in komplexen Gesellschaften* (pp. 11-38). Bern/Göttingen/Toronto/Seattle: Hans Huber.
- Renn, J. & Straub, J. (2002). Transitorische Identität. In J. Straub, & J. Renn (Eds.), *Transitorische Identität. Der Prozesscharakter des modernen Selbst* (pp. 10-31). Frankfurt/New York: Campus.
- Rosa, H. (2002). Zwischen Selbstthematisierungszwang und Artikulationsnot. In J. Straub, & J. Renn (Eds.), *Transitorische Identität. Der Prozesscharakter des modernen Selbst* (267-302). Frankfurt/New York: Campus.
- Ruck, N., & Slunecko, T. (2006). Dialogisches Selbst, Sozialer Konstruktivismus und die Stummheit des Leibes. Commentary on "Das dialogische Selbst: Interkulturelle Kommunikation 'in' der Person?" by B. Zielke, *Journal für Psychologie*, 12(3-4), 367-382.
- Schwingel, M. (2000). *Pierre Bourdieu. Zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius.
- Shweder, R. A. (1990). Cultural psychology – what is it? In J. W. Stigler, R. A. Shweder, & G. Herdt (Eds.), *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wertsch, J.W. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Katharina Hametner is a psychologist and PhD-scholar at the University of Vienna. She is lecturing at the Sigmund Freud University, Vienna and founding member of ikus. Her main research interests are identity theory, qualitative methods, migration, and cultural psychology. Email katharina.hametner@ikus.cc

Amrei C. Joerchel is currently working on her PhD at the University in Vienna. She is mainly interested in the concept of identity and culture. More specifically, her PhD concerns the theory of the dialogical self and the inclusion of the concept of culture. She is a founding member of ikus. Email amrei.joerchel@ikus.cc