

# **The Rise of Reflexive Identity in Moments of Breakdown. Commentary on “Reflexive and Non-reflexive Identity Perceptions: Finding a Balance” (Katharina Hametner & Amrei C. Joerchel)**

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PAUL DAANEN  
University of Cambridge

Hametner and Joerchel’s (2009) paper provides us with an introductory overview of some of the current theorizing concerning identity. They first introduce the basic and traditional understanding of identity as the response to the question of who one is (p. 23). Furthermore, they appropriately equate this understanding of identity with the necessary presence of reflexivity. Thus, in this sense, identity is something consciously evoked out of the background in response to a question.

The authors then move on to introduce work which advocates the conceptualizing identity as a fluid, processual phenomenon. Hametner and Joerchel summarize this position by explaining that “identity is nothing that a person has from 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 a secure outcome, but a temporary state” (pp. 23-24). Thus, in this second sense, identity is a processual phenomenon and may be defined as something continuously constructed—yet never completed—throughout the course of one’s life. Equally important for the point I want to make here, however, is this idea that identity can be thought of as a ‘temporary state.’

Like Hametner and Joerchel, I see some merit in these two positions. Clearly, we are all familiar with moments when we are consciously aware of certain aspects of our identity (e.g., when we find ourselves as a minority in some respect). Alternatively, I imagine that we all might agree that our identity is a fluid phenomenon that often shapes, shifts and changes in light of circumstance and experience. After all, I am not the same person I was ten years ago, nor do I think of myself in the same way across all situations.

The problem for Hametner and Joerchel, however, is the over reliance that these two positions place on the necessary presence of conscious awareness, or reflexivity, at the core of their theorizing. I very much agree with the authors, but I would like to take their criticism one step further. The problem with ‘overly cognitive’ conceptualizations of identity is merely a subset of the more general problem of an ‘overly cognitive’ depiction of ‘human nature’. Since Plato, the thinking and reasoning inherent to theoretical knowledge has been prized above all (in the Western world at least). Since Descartes, theoretical, reflective thought has come to be *ontologized*; not as something we specifically do when engaging in philosophical or scientific thinking, but rather as the essence of how we picture

the very nature of the human subject (Taylor, 1993). As Costall (2007) argues forcefully, this assumption has proven deeply problematic for Psychology.

At the very end of their paper, Hametner and Joerchel try to rectify this issue by offering a synthesis of the reflexive and non-reflexive properties of identity. In what follows, I would like to offer a suggestion which builds on their efforts. More specifically, I will very briefly introduce aspects of Heidegger's phenomenological critique of this 'overly cognitive' perspective and briefly explain how it contributes to an amelioration of our understanding of the relationship between reflexive and non-reflexive aspects of identity.

## **IDENTITY, REFLEXIVITY AND BREAKDOWN**

The key to understanding the relationship between reflexive and non-reflexive aspects of identity, in my mind, does not begin with examining identity *per se*. Rather, in order to properly understand this relationship, we must first understand the circumstances under which conscious thought or reflexivity itself is justifiably present or not. In other words, understanding the reflexivity of identity is merely a part of understanding the justifiable presence of reflexivity more generally.

Now, I have used the term 'justified' here for a specific reason; namely, that the extent to which we understand the necessary presence of reflexivity in human behavior depends on argument, not on strongly conclusive data. On the one hand, many advocates of Cognitive Science (to paint with broad brush strokes) might argue that conscious, reflective thought is a feature of all of our activity in the world. 'Rational Choice Theory' and 'the information processing model of the mind' are perfect examples of what I am referring to here. On the other hand, however, there are those who argue that conscious awareness, calculation, cognition or reflexivity do not characterize our most basic experiences and interactions with the world; rather, the presence of reflexivity derives out of our routine, habitual and thus non-reflective actions and interactions. We might refer to this second position as the Heideggerian phenomenological tradition, which has been expanded upon in Sociology by Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus and field.

Although I can not go into the respective arguments of either position in more detail here, in my mind, it is this latter tradition which offers us the best possibility for synthesizing the reflexive and non-reflexive aspects of identity, and thus contribute to the present topic at hand. The reason for this is that Heidegger brings both reflexivity and non-reflexivity under a common explanatory framework. Allow me to present a very simple example. It's a Monday morning. I wake up, take a shower, eat some breakfast and proceed to drive to work. I park my car, enter my office building and start typing away at my computer. Now, the key question for our purposes here is the following: How much reflexivity or conscious thought is necessary in order to complete this routine activity? Following Heidegger, I would argue hardly any at all. I 'know how' to drive cars, open office building doors, take showers and type on my computer. It is not necessary to posit that in order to complete these tasks, I have to somehow be interpreting symbols, following rules or verifying my beliefs against the reality of a world 'out there.' No, I get into the car and drive; I turn the door knob and walk through the door with absolute fluidity and ease. The reason for this is

that the meaning of the door knob on the office door is immediately and non-consciously obvious to me by virtue of the very act of perception itself (Daanen, 2009). To be a 'cultural being' who is 'at home' in one's culture is to immediately and non-consciously 'know how' to interact with the world without having to think about it.

However, if for some reason my routine engagement with the world 'breaks down' or 'ruptures,' then it makes perfect sense to conclude that conscious thought or reflexivity arises. If I grab the door knob and it falls off in my hand, I suddenly become conscious of my relationship with the door, the door knob and the office I am trying to enter in a way that I wasn't before. Now, 'breakdown' or 'rupture' aren't the only ways we become conscious of aspects of our world—I might love philosophically expounding on the utility of door knobs. Alternatively, I might travel to a different culture than my own and not 'know how' to do things in the appropriate ways. I might therefore be required to think about how I should do things, perhaps by watching and observing how locals behave in an effort to understand. I might even develop a list of rules to guide my behavior. However, the point to take from this is that all of these examples are derivative and 'abnormal' ways for most of us to exist in the world.

Now, you might ask yourself what this has to do with identity? The point I am trying to make here is that our consciousness of ourselves as possessing a certain identity is essentially similar to our consciousness of door knobs during moments of 'breakdown.' In our most basic and everyday interactions with the world, there is no need to posit the necessary presence of a conscious awareness of myself as present (as John Locke did). So, for example, when I am at the supermarket buying some cheese, I am unlikely to be conscious of myself as a male, an American or a fan of the Chicago White Sox (my favorite baseball team). Provided all is routine and non-problematic, my *identification* with these aspects of 'my self' are just not consciously present for me in this act.

However, while trying to decide between Gruyère or Manchego, if someone approaches me and yells 'the Chicago White Sox stink!' (perhaps because I am wearing their team hat), I might suddenly become very conscious of this aspect of my identity. My identification with the Chicago White Sox arises out of a rupture in my non-reflexive *being-in-the-world*. After this episode, I might return home and forget all about this incident. My identification with the Chicago White Sox is still there and a 'part of me' in the sense that it will non-consciously shape my practices. For example, I will turn on the White Sox game and cheer for them instead of some other team. However, the point here is that I don't self-consciously *identify* myself as a White Sox fan while doing so. After coming back from the supermarket, my reflexive identification with the Chicago White Sox has receded into some non-reflexive corner of 'my self' until the next time a rupture or breakdown calls it forth.

## CONCLUSION

In the very beginning of this paper, I summarized two of the main theoretical articulations of identity that Hametner and Joerchel introduced and subsequently found incomplete; namely, that identity has been conceptualized as both a conscious response to the question of who am I?, as well as a procedural phenomenon *qua* 'work in progress.' Hametner and

Joerchel conclude their paper by arguing for a revised emphasis on the role of non-reflective aspects to identity. They advocate the importance of understanding identity as implicitly present in our practical engagements with the world, where the conscious articulation of identity is only ever partially possible. In introducing the relevance of Heideggerian phenomenological arguments concerning the rise of conscious, reflexive thought in moments of rupture or breakdown, I hope this very short commentary might help to further explicate this relationship between reflexive and non-reflexive aspects of identity.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Paul Daanen is completing his PhD in Social and Cultural Psychology at the University of Cambridge. His research examines how the English speaking community of Montreal is in the process of renegotiating their identity in order to cope with the sudden rise of Francophone nationalism in Quebec. After completing his PhD, Paul is exploring additional research opportunities to further refine the theoretical framework he developed in Quebec by applying it to other, closely related social and political situations. Apart from his research, Paul is also very interested in current theoretical debates in Cultural Psychology, Sociology and Philosophy, and in particular how these debates may be synthesized in order to improve social theory as a whole. Email pd285@cam.ac.uk