

Returning To James: A Methodological Challenge. Commentary on “Reflexive and Non-reflexive Identity Perceptions: Finding a Balance” (Katharina Hametner & Amrei C. Joerchel)

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The article by Hametner and Joerchel (2009) makes a clear and cogent argument for developing a theory of identity that includes both reflexive and non-reflexive aspects in a dynamic model. The argument is compelling and difficult to disagree with. On the one hand it is clear that there is a reflexive, explicit and narrative aspect to the self. This is evident in the narratives people tell about themselves, the way in which they think about their possessions and achievements, and the answers they provide about themselves in interviews and self-report questionnaires. On the other hand it is also clear that there are patterns of action which are outside of the reflexive self-concept, and yet which are still part of the self. For example, alcoholics and drug abusers are often the last to realise the problems caused by their habitual behaviour. Equally, people on holiday often criticise the behaviour of ‘other’ tourists while failing to notice that their own behaviour is quite similar (Ichheiser, 1949; Gillespie, 2007). Hametner and Joerchel are correct when they argue, first, that reflexive aspects of identity have received more research attention than the non-reflexive aspects, and, secondly, that our theories of identity need to integrate both reflexive and non-reflexive aspects of the self.

However, the situation described by Hametner and Joerchel is puzzling when one considers it in the light of the fact that one of the earliest and most popular conceptualisations of the self, put forward by William James, emphasised both the reflexive and non-reflexive aspects of the self in a dynamic model. Indeed, James (1893) is often quoted as saying:

“Whatever I may be thinking of, I am always at the same time more or less aware of myself, of my personal existence. At the same time it is I who am aware; so that the total self of me, being as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject, must have two aspects discriminated in it of which for shortness we may call one the Me and the other the I.” (James, 1893, p. 176)

What James is saying is that the self is only ever partly known. The known aspect he calls the ‘Me.’ But who is it who knows this ‘Me’? James’ answer is that the ‘Me’ is known by unknown aspects of the self, namely, various ‘I’ positions. For self to become an object to self there must, James argues, be two aspects: one part known (i.e., ‘Me’) and one part knowing (i.e., ‘I’).

Taking up James’ terminology we can characterise Hametner and Joerchel as advocating that more research is done on the ‘I’ within James’ scheme. While plenty of research has examined the self-concept, self-representations, and self-images of various groups (i.e., research on the ‘Me’), little research has examined the ‘I.’ Each self entails many ‘I’

positions—they are the positions from which we perceive, think and act (as opposed to what we perceive, think or act towards). 'I' positions are not given by nature, rather, like Bourdieu's concept of habitus, we are socialised into them. Moreover, they introduce creative non-linearity into the heart of the self. As the self becomes aware of self's own 'I' positions, that awareness becomes a new 'me.' The 'I' acts, and through social processes of feedback, actors become aware of their actions, able to see them through the eyes of the community, and thus gain new 'Me' facets. Thus the I/Me formulation, put forward by James, is highly dynamic and includes within itself a dynamic that can be used to theorise change within the self—and thus again the formulation seems to answer to the call put forward by Hametner and Joerchel.

In light of this return to James, the problematic pointed to by Hametner and Joerchel needs some reframing. The question, I suggest, is not why are there no theories that integrate the reflexive and non-reflexive aspects of the self. Indeed, one could argue that the most classic theory of the self, put forward by James, does just this. The problematic is more subtle: Why, despite the existing theory, does research on the self remain largely concerned with the reflexive, or known, aspect of identities?

The answer, I suspect, is methodological. Methodology has not kept pace with theoretical development. The main methodologies available for studying the self, such as self-report questionnaires, interviews, and content analysis of various data sources, afford an analysis of people's and groups' self-conceptions. Whether one uses questionnaires, interviews or focus groups, the tendency in research has been to ask people about their identities, and from that data it is very difficult to get beyond the reflexive self-reported identifications and self-conceptions. How, when swamped in self-report data, can we begin to grapple with the non-verbalised, the non-reflexive and implicit aspects of identity? Or rather, what data and what methods of analysis are more likely to be more productive in making visible the implicit dynamics of identity? The field is not ready to provide an answer to this question, but it can provide a couple of useful pointers.

First, studying the 'I' or the non-reflexive and implicit aspects of identity requires making interpretations—going beyond the data to postulate something which those being studied might not even agree with. If our participants did agree with our analysis, then it would no longer be an analysis of 'I' positions, but rather an analysis of 'Me' self images. Making interpretations may seem bold, and risk being unscientific. But there are many objects taken as 'real' within physics which have never been 'seen'—but only inferred from data. The key is in how the interpretations and inferences are made, and on the basis of what data.

Secondly, researchers of identity need to broaden their sources of data and develop new ways of analysing that data. If researchers only use questionnaires, interviews and/or focus groups, then it is very difficult to get beyond self-report. In order to examine the practical aspects of identity, mentioned by Hametner and Joerchel, researchers need to observe practical action. In this regard, ethnography provides some direction. Good examples of ethnographic research on identity are provided by Adams (1996) and Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain (1998). Drawing upon the anthropological tradition, their combination of subtle observation and refined interpretation enable going beyond self-reports towards more implicit aspects of identity. In order to examine the more

psychological 'I' positions, mentioned by James, and central to the theory of the Dialogical Self, researchers are going to have to get at the stream of thought. Valsiner and van der Veer (1988) and Valsiner (2003) have made progress in this regard. They argue for micro step-by-step analyses of spontaneous discourse, where reflexive and alternating moves between the 'I' and the 'Me' can be empirically observed. Combining both observation of action and microanalysis of the stream of thought, would enable us to get at the implicit aspects of identity both in terms of action and thought.

Hametner and Joerchel's paper leave us with a methodological challenge. It is not enough to simply state that the self is dynamic and that it comprises reflexive and non-reflexive components. The challenge is to make these aspects visible within our research. Current methodology, arguably, does more to conceal than reveal the non-reflexive and dynamic aspects of identity, and accordingly, new methodologies are needed.

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