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Andrew J. Weigert, J. Smith Teitge and Dennis W. Teitge

Excerpt

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## PART I

### The story of whence identity and a step toward theory

“Identity” is both a cultural cliché and a technical term in the interpretive vocabularies of social and psychological analysts in the early 1980s. A mere forty years before, the term was hard to find. The story of the emergence of identity in the work of sociological social psychologists is briefly told in Chapter 1. In spite of the schematic nature of the chapter, we believe the main outlines are clear. Powerful and different sources came together in a unique configuration. The social and psychological turmoil of World War II provided a historical context in which what we may call the identity question was asked in three different situations.

First, a nation of immigrants asked what it meant to be an American, both during a war against the mother countries of many of its citizens and in the following period of prosperity amid anxiety, punctuated by emancipatory social movements. Second, an intellectually and geographically migrating scholar moved across the national boundaries of German- and English-speaking worlds and across the intellectual boundaries of psychoanalytic and social anthropological paradigms; as he struggled to make sense out of his biography and to understand the character malaise of contemporary persons, Erik Erikson began formulating the concept of ego identity and articulating the problem of identity as characteristic of the modern world. Finally, a small group of sociologists working within a version of American pragmatism were trying to develop a more adequate sociological psychology for understanding human action as essentially social; they knew of Erikson’s work and quickly adopted his term, but shortened it to “identity.” Fueled by these three sources, identity was “in the air” by the 1960s and on everyone’s tongue by the 1970s. As far as our preliminary investigation can uncover, the term indeed is propelled from Erikson’s written formulations and collegial networks. Over the next twenty years, however, the term was used by sociologists working in five different theoretical traditions: processual and structural symbolic interactionism, sociology of knowledge, structural-functionalism,

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and critical theory. Analysts investigating a host of social and psychological issues came to use identity as a conceptual tool.

Chapter 1 is not a technical history of an idea not the history of the emergence of a paradigm. As we see it, the paradigm already existed in critical social science – namely, that sociocultural factors shape the structure and content of human self-definition. The chapter does try to tell the story of the origin and diffusion of identity as *the* term for conceptualizing a distinctly sociological perspective on the perennial question of human self-definition. Furthermore, identity brings an enhanced sensitivity to structures and processes from the micro, cognitive, and interactional levels of analysis to the macro, ideological, and structural levels. Identity, then, serves as a contemporary formulation of a perennial human issue and a fruitful bridging concept for organizing work in sociological psychology.

Chapter 2 presents a series of general propositions and a definition of identity that outline a generic theory of identity. The orienting paradigm is that social reality is a human social production. This statement must be taken together with its triplet-born propositions: Social reality is a human production; social reality is an emergent reality, *sui generis*; and humans themselves are societal productions (see Berger and Luckmann 1966). This social constructionist paradigm tries to bring together the concepts of micro and macro, as well as processual and structural traditions in sociology. Identity cuts across these boundaries.

We argue that an adequate understanding of human identity as a total social fact can be won only through an interpretation based on a social constructionist paradigm. On the other hand, we are not so foolish as to think that a total social fact is ever understood totally. Even less do we think that there is only one way to investigate social facts, and we have first-hand experience with the intrinsic limitation of any single study. No research study and perhaps no scholar can produce an adequate interpretation of identity. Nevertheless, the community of knowers is best served, we believe, by a social constructionist paradigm if the goal is deeper sociological psychological knowledge.

To clarify still further our theoretical allegiance, we distinguish two types of social constructionist strategies that we may label, we hope without offense, the reductionist and the pragmatic. *Reductionist* social constructionist thinkers tend to argue that there is no “reality” such as social structure; that individuals are responsible for their own identities; that imaginative and interactional processes exhaust the content of human meanings; that individual freedom is the touchstone of social reality; and that only certain evidences, empirical methods, and genres for presenting data are valid. *Pragmatic* social constructionist thinkers, on the other hand, tend to argue that there are irreducible “levels of social reality”; that individuals’ responsibility for their own identities is variable and con-

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strained; that imagination and interaction, as well as a priori social forms, enter and shape human meanings with variable but independent power; that individual freedom dialectically related to social determinism is the definitive social process; and that any communicable evidence, shared empirical methods, and interpretable genres for presenting data are valid, as long as – and here is the keystone – investigators are self-consciously in control of the relationships among data, questions, genre, assumptions, and the original social reality under investigation. Pragmatic social constructionist thinking, then, can be extended to include the work of other theoretical and empirical traditions, such as structural analysis, quantitative data, and hypothetico-deductive studies, whether from social surveys, experiments, or sociobiological research. The tough intellectual work is not simply to rule out methods or evidence a priori; rather, it is knowing how to interpret them meaningfully within an adequate theoretical paradigm. The task of Chapter 2 is to take a step, no matter how gingerly, toward these goals.

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## I. Identity: its emergence within sociological psychology

By the 1980s, *identity* has become a stock technical term in sociology and a widespread social label. Before the early 1940s, it was unknown. Within the span of about forty years, identity has become an indispensable technical term and a cultural buzzword. Its theoretical, empirical, and cultural importance shows no sign of abating as social scientists, clinicians, historians, psychologists, philosophers, and the media continue to apply, dispute, and develop the idea. Nevertheless, identity lacks an adequate theoretical development in contemporary sociological social psychology (cf. Rosenberg and Turner 1981).

The expanse of scholarly and popular writings on identity cannot, of course, be adequately handled in a single chapter. Nor is it our intent to do so. Rather, we focus on but one of the themes within the general issue of identity – namely, how this idea took shape and continues to thrive within the development of a sociological social psychology, or sociological psychology (see Weigert 1975). The presentation of material follows the chronological order of the seminal writings on identity. We focus the emergence of identity within sociological psychology around three questions:

1. What are the recent origins of the concept?
2. How did it find its way into sociological psychology?
3. Why was it so quickly taken over by sociological psychologists?

Accordingly, we attempt to locate the emergence of the term in its historical context, and to limn the main lines of development within sociological psychology.

Precursors to the concept of identity had been developing in the domains of sociology, anthropology, and psychology. The research and theorizing in these disciplines gave central importance to such concepts as self, character, and personality, respectively, through the period of World War II. The central paradigm informing these lines of development is summarized in the principle: *Social organization is the principle of self-organization, and both together explain social action*. Even into the early 1950s, sociologists (such as Riesman et al. 1950;

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Gerth and Mills 1953/1964) conceptualized the social individual in terms of “character,” probably accepting the importance of the term from anthropologists such as Benedict, Mead, and Kardiner. During this period, however, the term identity was incubating in the matrices of small groups of scholars concerned with interpreting American culture in the aftermath of World War II.

### **Historical and biographical moments in the emergence of identity**

The plural origins and recent birth of American society had become a central focus in the two world wars. Twice within a single lifetime, Americans were mobilized to fight “over there” or to “remember Pearl Harbor.” In neither war was there a popularly perceived direct threat that usually motives warfare, such as invasion, annexation, or loss of control of vital resources. American leaders, therefore, were deeply concerned with the problem of motivating a “nation of immigrants” to go to war against countries from which many of their own parents or grandparents had come. Men and women had to be persuaded that they were “Americans” as opposed to Germans, Italians, or Japanese, even if their names happened to be Hartmann, Cellino, or Toguchi. Nor were national leaders the only persons concerned. The everyday lives of people were touched by the same question, especially if a neighbor, teacher, or shopkeeper commented on a national origin from one of America’s current enemies. Children whose parents spoke little or no English had to balance the tension between becoming 100 percent American and remaining loyal to the family. Such dilemmas in one form or another are the perennial problem of the immigrant. As a nation of immigrants recently at war with nations of origin, the problem became particularly intense for the United States.

In the late 1930s and through the period of World War II, a recent Viennese immigrant began a line of scholarly and literary productivity that gave birth to the concept of identity as a technical term. As a clinical psychoanalyst out of the Freudian tradition and specialized in the development and socialization of children, Erik Homburger Erikson brought a neo-Freudian schooling in the issue of children’s identification with parents to his sensitive personal and clinical experience. He saw that children identify with parents over a wide range of deep human issues, such as existential security, sexuality, autonomy, shame, and guilt. Erikson was interested in the struggle children go through to synthesize the continual bodily changes of youth into a meaningful sense of an integrated ego capable of guiding them into a productive and secure adulthood.

True to his neo-Freudian heritage and clinical experience, Erikson studied the processes of ego synthesis in critical moments and under conditions of break-

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down. Analysis of the abnormal and pathological enables the clinician to see the underlying normal processes at work more clearly. In addition, as an immigrant himself, Erikson experienced at first hand the process of acculturation into a new society under conditions of international tension and destructive warfare between his adopted country and his country of origin. A born and bred European scholar underwent the paradigmatic American experience of being an immigrant while already a mature adult and creative thinker.

The historical and personal reality of immigration was interpreted through Erikson's continual and vital dialogue with American psychoanalytic scholars. In addition, however, he began working with anthropologists and developing his methodological commitment to participation in and observation of the culture of those whose lives he was trying to understand. Erikson went into the field to understand how children develop a sense of ego synthesis, especially those children who are "in between" or struggling with unresolved ego crises. The anthropological experience gave the final impetus to Erikson's comparative analysis of ego development in anxious children. He studied American children in Vienna, arrogant Nazi youth, apathetic American Indians, confused war veterans, and crew members in submarines. He became acutely aware of the impact of historical reality and cultural change in the formation of youthful egos: How can a young Sioux Indian have a highly motivated and synthesized ego if the core cultural realities of buffalo hunter and warrior no longer exist? How can any youth shape a secure and synthesized ego if the socio-cultural context is ever-shifting and becoming more complex?

Erikson faced these questions both in his own life and in the people he studied. He took the polarity of human nature and social reality, interpreted it through the Freudian formulation of *ethos* and *ego*, and reformulated it as "group identity" and "ego identity" (Erikson 1946, 1956, reprinted 1959). His initial publications in which the term *ego identity* appears virtually coincide with the end of World War II. His reformulation of the human nature–social reality polarity introduced the new technical term he chose at least in part for its interdisciplinary usefulness (Erikson 1981). The term served prophetically to define a problem on which scholars from a wide range of disciplines, methodologies, theoretical orientations, and political leanings were to find common ground.

Erikson wrote virtually alone during the late 1940s and early 1950s about human development, historical change, and personal health, with identity as the organizing concept (cf. Fromm 1941). In his early formulations and consistent with his literary style, Erikson offered minimal definitional and theoretical elaboration. He distinguished routine "personal identity" as the normal way we are seen and interpreted by others from his technical use of *ego identity*. He gave *ego identity* a psychoanalytic and functional definition as a "group-psychological

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phenomenon.” He wrote that “Ego identity . . . is the awareness of the fact that there is a selfsameness and continuity to the ego’s synthesizing methods and that these methods are effective in safeguarding the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others” (1946, reprinted 1959: 23). Armed with this functional way of thinking, which is open to both psychological and sociohistorical reality, Erikson opened up a tremendous epistemological space for analyzing the human condition. He went on to write about inner identity, identity diffusion, wholeness and identity, racial group identities, psychosocial identity moratorium, psychohistory, and developmental identity over the life course.

In answer to a request for conceptual clarification, Erikson published the paradigmatic article, “The Problem of Ego Identity,” in 1956. This treatment of ego identity is perhaps the single piece that has had the most influence on those working within sociological psychology. In it, he emphasizes that ego identity must be both a functioning psychological achievement of individuals and limited by, as well as fitted to, the sociohistorical moment in which that individual lives. He mentions the phrase “theory of identity” toward the end of the article. He has indeed formulated a social psychoanalytic psychology. The key graphic in the article presents Erikson’s eight-stage epigenesis of the person as he or she develops over the life course. Identity is the epigenetic task specific to adolescence, but Erikson sees contemporary society as essentially similar to the changing, ambivalent, uncertain environment of the adolescent. In effect, Erikson argues that contemporary society makes adolescents of us all, and thus identity crisis becomes the typical biographical crisis of the modern person.

The publication of his widely read and influential books, essays, and addresses fueled and solidified his impact. *Childhood and Society*, in which he especially thanks Margaret Mead, was published in 1950 and revised in 1963. Two key articles, including the paradigmatic piece, were reprinted in a single volume, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959, reissued 1980). Furthermore, his application of the concept of identity to Martin Luther (1958) gave a major impetus to the possibility of psychohistory as a synthesis of his theory of identity and historical analysis. His stream of publications continues the analysis of identity in the modern world, across cultures, and on into the later stages of the life cycle (Erikson 1968, 1968a, 1974, 1978; see Kakar 1979).

Erikson’s conceptualization of identity combined his early developmental interest in the inner psychological unfolding of individual identity with his awareness of the impact of historical and sociocultural factors on the identities as they are realized. The paradigm of human nature–social reality is reformulated in the context of historical change and biographical circumstances into the powerful twins of identity–society and identity–history.



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**The diffusion of identity**

The link between psychological reality and sociohistorical events proved attractive to sociologists working within the interactionist tradition of American pragmatism. One branch of this tradition was especially receptive. Following the coining of the phrase “symbolic interaction” by Herbert Blumer in the late 1930s, a group of scholars centered at the University of Chicago was developing, with a social nominalist and processual emphasis, the seminal ideas of George H. Mead concerning self and society (Lewis and Smith 1980). Erikson’s work at Harvard influenced these Chicago symbolic interactionists, especially those interested in medical, psychiatric, and deviance issues.

An early and still influential publication fusing the two lines of thought is Nelson Foote’s 1951 article in the *American Sociological Review*. Foote interpreted human motivation as a consequence of identification with a group. He conceptualized identification as the “appropriation of and commitment to a particular identity or series of identities. As a process, it proceeds by *naming*: its products are ever-evolving self-conceptions – with emphasis on the *con*, that is, upon ratification by significant others” [italics his]. Although he spends a paragraph indicating how much this idea owes to Freud and how it would differ from a Freudian explanation, Foote does not cite Erikson’s work. Rather, he cites an intellectual debt to Mead’s social behaviorism, and to an incipient social psychology with a symbolic interaction perspective indebted to literary sources such as Kenneth Burke. Indeed, Foote (1981) states that his reflections on identity were stimulated by his reading Erikson and earlier novels written during the 1930s.

In 1955 Foote coauthored *Identity and Interpersonal Competence*, dealing with family, personal competence, and public policy, with Leonard Cottrell, who followed a more behavioristic and situational interpretation of Mead’s writings. Although the book featured identity in its title, the term is not defined or explicitly developed as an operative concept. Identity is simply described as a “wandering” thread that unites episodes, goes through dramatic changes, and is a central element in interpersonal competence and family life. The authors cite work done by social psychologists and social psychiatrists who share an emphasis on interpersonal relations and interaction as the matrix of human development. They cite Erikson’s *Childhood and Society* approvingly in places, but without explicit recognition of, or dependence on, his attempts to formulate a definition of ego identity. Foote and his colleagues are part of a group of scholars from a variety of disciplines who share a discoverer’s excitement over their common view of the “real” interactional process producing healthy human persons



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and of the central importance of a stable yet flexible self-conception or identity. They also share a normative interest, either as clinicians or policymakers.

Three years later, two more books appear that focus on identity. One by a psychoanalyst, Alan Wheelis, is entitled *The Quest for Identity* (1958). In spite of the title, the book primarily discusses character and superego, and uses identity “in its ordinary lay meaning” (p. 247). This lay usage is contrasted with the more precise meaning within psychoanalytic literature, at which point Wheelis refers to Erikson’s 1956 paper on ego-identity. Apparently, in Wheelis’s mind, identity is already a common lay term for making sense out of the crisis in the 1950s brought on by increasingly rapid social change and increased awareness of the changes (p. 84).

The second book, *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (1958, 1961), was written by the sociologist-philosopher Helen Merrell Lynd, coauthor of the famous *Middletown*. The book presents a tightly reasoned and wide-ranging discussion relating emotions, especially shame, to the issue of identity in postwar America. Like Wheelis, Lynd sees Americans as questing for a social psychological sense of well-being that has somehow been lost, and she uses the concept of identity as an analytical tool. Her heavily referenced argument relies on the writings of Erikson. Indeed, she begins her argument by summarizing Erikson’s position, that “the search for identity has become as strategic in our time as the study of sexuality was in Freud’s time” (Lynd 1961: 14). Lynd’s creative argument synthesizes much of the writing on identity prior to 1958, including psychoanalytic, anthropological, psychological, sociological, linguistic, and historical sources. She includes page citations to work by Chicago sociologists – for example, to an unpublished mimeographed paper by Anselm Strauss, “An Essay on Identity” (University of Chicago 1957) – as well as to Erving Goffman’s earlier essays. Her book serves as an important transition piece from psychoanalytic writings to work more central to sociological psychology.

The major impetus making identity a central concern for symbolic interactionists came from Strauss’s published revision of his mimeographed essay. *Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity* was published in 1959 and recently reissued. In his preface, Strauss thanks a list of scholars, most of whom were connected at one time with the University of Chicago or Harvard University. The list includes virtually everyone who was to write a major piece on identity during the 1960s. A special note of thanks is given to Nelson Foote for his inspiration of the group project that motivated Strauss to write the essay (Strauss 1959, 1981). At the time, Strauss was working at the Psychosomatic and Psychiatric Institute in Chicago. He had earlier been at Indiana University and coauthored the classic symbolic interaction social psychology textbook with Alfred Lindesmith that has lasted for about forty years and five editions. True to classical symbolic interac-

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tion sources, however, the text speaks of self and not identity, except in a paragraph or two in later editions. Nevertheless, in his own book *Mirrors and Masks*, Strauss makes identity a technical term for sociological psychology. He sees identity as necessarily “connected with the fateful appraisals made of oneself – by oneself and by others” (p. 9).

The book’s first citation is to Erikson’s paradigmatic article, but it rejects the concept of ego-identity as an adequate definition for sociological psychology. Rather, Strauss follows the typical symbolic interaction procedure of using identity as a sensitizing concept, admittedly ambiguous and diffuse, in order to “better look around the corners of the problems, and be less likely to slide down the well-worn grooves of other men’s thought” (pp. 9–10). He sees his task as fusing “symbolic interactional and social organizational perspectives into a workable, suggestive social psychology” (p. 11). Echoing the earlier article by Foote (1951), Strauss emphasizes language, naming, and interaction. Finally, he quotes Erikson’s son, Kai Erikson, to the effect that Strauss is “discussing a facet of identity: that aspect of my subject which deals not with ‘ego-identity’ but with how persons become implicated with other persons and are affected, and affect each other, through that implication” (p. 13). These scholars are struggling for an adequate formulation of identity as an interactional reality. Strauss’s incipient theory sees identity constituted by self-appraisals by self and others; by placements and evaluations of individuals; by names bestowed on persons; and by changes experienced and imposed over the course of a lifetime. His treatment served as a seminal text for symbolic interactionists, dramaturgical sociologists, and others working toward a sociological psychology.

A second modern classic for sociological psychology was published by a University of Chicago sociologist who shared many of Strauss’s concerns, but who did not start with identity as a technical term. Erving Goffman’s book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959, earlier version published 1956), treats the definition and interpretation of individuals as performing characters in social situations. The entire essay is organized around the concept of self. Goffman concludes, against the commonsense view, that the “performed self” is a product of the interactional scene and not its cause.

Strauss’s and Goffman’s discussions reflect a continuing conceptual ambiguity indicated by the use of *self* and *identity* in similar analyses by exponents of a similar perspective, but without clear theoretical distinction. In this book, Goffman cites another influential University of Chicago sociologist, E. C. Hughes, whose work made passing use of the term identity (see Hughes 1971). The focus of Goffman’s book is further sharpened by his familiarity with social psychiatry grounded in over a year of observational research at a large mental institution in Washington, D.C. This research provided a basis for his creative contribution to