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978-0-521-03334-3 - Society and Identity: Toward a Sociological Psychology

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

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During the past forty years there has been an explosion of writings, both scientific and nonscientific, about the question of “identity” and what it means to be an individual in today’s world. This book examines sociological perspectives on identity in order to illuminate the perennial problem of defining the human person, and to propose a new definition of identity based on its being socially constructed.

Beginning with a review of previous studies of identity, the authors present a set of propositions for organizing the wide range of uses of the term, and for arriving at an adequate definition of it. They then analyze identity in two contexts: one – gender identity – linked to present bodies, and the other – prenatal and postmortem identities – linked to future and past bodies. They show that whereas gender identity reveals the powerful but breakable link between body type and identity, prenatal and postmortem identities illustrate the symbolic reality and partial independence of identity from any corporeal existence. This analysis demonstrates the interpretive power of a theory of identity that views it as a reality constructed by human beliefs, actions, and artifacts in the process of people living together. It leads into a final chapter that raises a series of value issues about identity: Are some identities sacred and unquestionable? Are identities what make us real persons? Or are they mere masks that render us inauthentic?

The issues of identity and a meaningful life are crucial in the modern world. This innovative and insightful study will appeal to sociologists, social psychologists, and social philosophers concerned with understanding the nature of human identity and contribute to a sociological approach to generic issues in social psychology.

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of the American Sociological Association**

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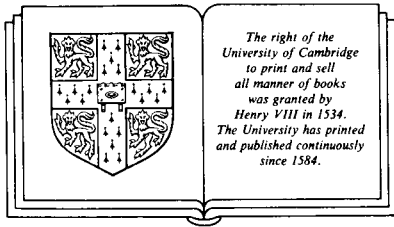
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To

Marie

Fred and Dorothy

Kathleen, Karen, and Sheila

Josh and Deni

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Preface

Humans have always attempted to define themselves individually and collectively. Merely listing some essentially human characteristics evokes primeval memories of what we once thought of our selves. From ancient times, the individual has been ultimately defined by inexplicable or observable functions, remnants and fantasies of the bodily self. The human may be a “shade” inhabiting a body, a divine spark giving life to the body, a breath whose presence assured that life was present, or a psyche or mind that accounted for the individual’s experience of mental reality. During the Christian era, many of these essences, purified of organic vestiges, came to be located in the idea of a soul, that totally spiritual entity that gave each person his or her individuality and transcendent existence.

After the Cartesian critique and the Enlightenment reformulation, the human person came to be thought of as a thinker of reason or a machine of matter. At the turn of the nineteenth century, American social thinkers, influenced by German romantic philosophers, adopted the language of the self to refer to the uniquely human component of such members of the animal kingdom. After the Darwinian impact, self was seen as emerging by the same natural laws operating in the rest of the biological world; and yet, with language and culture, humans acquire a different kind of consciousness – namely, self-consciousness. The social self is a concept that has been variously acceptable and unacceptable to both idealist and materialist interpreters of the human person. At about the same time, psychological thinkers were developing concepts such as ego, personality, and character to explain the psychic reality of the human person. Into these streams of thought, and quickly throughout contemporary American social and psychological commentary, came the recent concept of identity. In a real sense, we take the concept of identity as a descendant of the earlier attempts to answer the perennial questions: How do we define the human individual? Who are we?

As sociologists, we come to this issue with a general set of intellectual concerns. Like the meaning of any other object in our sociocultural context, the human individual is defined within the symbols and meanings available in our

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historical time. Furthermore, we take these meanings to be, at least in large part, socially constructed. In other words, intentional, interactional, structural, and cultural processes and objects enter into our definition of our selves and into the public definition of us by others. As we may put it aphoristically: Social organization is the principle of self-organization.

Our work in this area has a dual purpose. The direct and overriding goal is to shed light on the perennial issue of human definition. Indeed, we are convinced of the urgent relevance of Erik Erikson's informed insistence that the integrity and continuity of human identity is a defining feature of our times. Our indirect and secondary goal is to help develop a sociologically grounded approach to the generic issues of social psychology. We feel that such an approach is both vitally needed and sorely underdeveloped to date.

This book hazards a step or two toward our goals. First, we endeavor to present a preliminary historical understanding of the emergence and uses of identity within sociological social psychology. This is the task of Chapter 1. To be usable for a sociological enterprise, the concept of identity needs both theoretical articulation and empirical application. Chapter 2 attempts an initial codification and a nominal definition that brings together the main lines of writing about identity. The next two chapters move closer to the empirical moment. Chapter 3 builds on innovative and provocative work in the area of gender identity while formulating testable propositions relating homosexual identity and occupation. Chapter 4 takes us a step further toward a sociological understanding of identity by considering cases of identities without typical bodily presence, as in the cases of prenatal and postmortem identities. These considerations convince us of the relevance and power of a social constructionist approach to the issue of defining the human individual. We are eager to see if others feel the same. Finally, we end on the note that motivated us throughout: The issue of identity is a definitive feature of contemporary life.

We would like to thank Professor Suzanne Keller for seeing strengths in our original manuscript and for patience throughout the revision process. Thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewers for helping us to spill off some bathwater without losing the baby. The typing credits go to Ms. Shirley Schneck and the University of Notre Dame Faculty steno pool, especially Karen Kretschmer, Debra K. Nicodemus, and Sandy Superczynski.

Our thanks go also to JAI Press, Inc., for permission to use a slightly revised version of "Identity: its emergence within sociological psychology," *Symbolic Interaction* 6(2):183–206 (1983).

Finally, we would like to thank our parents, both of German and Native-American origin, who gave us a sense of our identities past, and our current families who are giving us our meaning of self and identity today.