

Self, identity and identity formation: From the perspectives of three major theories

Hüseyin Cinoğlu¹
Yusuf Arıkan²

Abstract

This study revealed that there are three major perspectives in explaining the identity and identity formation. The first one is social identity theory where the founders see the group membership as the driving force for identity formation. The next theory is identity theory, in which the roles that are assigned to individuals are deemed as the major source for energy to identity formation. The last theory talks about the importance of personal values in explaining the identity and identity formation process (personal identity theory). This paper will talk about three of them separately and in the end the need to merge these theories will be stressed.

Keywords: Identity, identity formation, social identity theory, identity theory, personal identity theory.

Introduction

In this paper, the researcher will examine the concept of identity and its formation process from a more theoretical perspective. It is a fundamental fact that groups need to have their own type of members in order to assert their distinction from which they derive the energy for survival. These members are to be designated with similar goals, same sources for references, same ideals, same leaders to look up to, same environment, and although not strictly required as the earlier ones but similar socio-economic statuses. It is apparent that finding candidates with similar characteristics is a very difficult and costly task. Therefore, groups might turn to a less costly option: identity formation and resocialization processes. New members go through transformations

¹ Associate Professor and Department Chair, Turkish National Police Academy, Faculty of Security Sciences, Department of Security Management, Ankara, Turkey. hcinoglu@pa.edu.tr

² Assistant Professor and Department Chair, Turkish National Police Academy, Faculty of Security Sciences, Department of Compulsory Courses, Ankara, Turkey. arikany@hotmail.com

in which they are being cut off from the mainstream in order to learn the new rules of the group that they want to be or forced to be a member of.

Self and identity in Sociology and Social Psychology

As cited in Stets and Burke (2003), sociological understanding of self and identity starts with the presupposition of the existence of a reciprocal relationship between the self and the society (Stryker, 1980). To them (Stets and Burke, 2003), assuming the existence of this reciprocal interaction between self and society could be the proclamation of the acceptance of not only the power of self over society, but also the power of society over the self in its identity formation endeavors. The self uses social entities that it already has participated in their creation, while on the other hand, society uses the culture to help or force the self in identity formation. It is very clear that to better understand the self and identity we also need to understand and investigate the society that took part in the identity formation process of the self. As a matter of fact, to Stryker (1980), self cannot be separated from the society because self can only exist and be meaningful in its relation with other selves or entities. This explanation brings a very simple question to mind: so what are self and identity?

Self

As cited in Hitlin (2003: pg. 118), Joas (2000: pg. 2) believes that *self* is “one of the greatest discoveries in the history of the social sciences”. Since the *self* is the primary actor of the identity formation process, one should also learn how sociology and social psychology define the *self*. According to Stets and Burke (2000: 224) self “is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications”. Actually it is this categorization that will produce identity in the end. In their definitions Stets and Burke (2000) believe that self is seen as the conscious essence that has meaningful and effective relationship with other social entities. And self is a dynamic entity with the ability to interpret and reinterpret their environments and eventually transform themselves into something that we could identify as the next step: identity.

Symbolic Interaction tradition in sociology tends to see the self as an offspring of mind, which is created during interactions with social institutions (Mead, 1934). To him, the mind is the tool that the self uses to evaluate its social environment, interpret the interaction and use the outcome to reevaluate and, if necessary, change itself. Therefore, to Mead (1934) the self has the ability to see itself as an object and also has the ability to change and control itself. At that point, the reference points become important. In other words, since the self will utilize them as yardsticks,

the references, target groups or significant individuals become the major source for inspirations to *self*. Mead's (1934) *Taking the Role of the Other* and Cooley's (1902) *Looking-Glass Self* theories talk about the details of this process. However, since in-depth definition of the self is not the primary object of this paper, the researcher will suffice to mention these theories for further readings.

However, just like seeing the self as a creation of the society, seeing the self as the sole product of the mind is also a mistake. Because, as was mentioned above, self is an entity that is created out of the interpretation of the interaction between the society and the individual by the mind. The next step for humans, as put by Stets and Burke (2003), is to develop a self awareness, which we also can call as self-concept. Self-concept is the stage where the self realizes its existence and distinction from the society. To Rosenberg (1979) self-concept is the stage where the self evaluates itself both in "positive and negative terms". So self-concept becomes the collection of the meanings that we attribute to ourselves. To him, self-concept also provides the self with self-esteem, which is a valuable asset in identity formation.

Identity

Stryker (1980) claims that we can take the self as the reflection of the society that it belongs. To Stets and Burke (2003), since we do have different types of selves in society we should also have something that supersedes the *self*. At that point, to explain the differences in the selves in society, scholars introduce the notion of *identity*. To Stryker (1980) identity is the social position that the self not only possesses but also internalizes. Put differently, for each of the social statuses that the self has, it also has an identity attached to it. Therefore, it is safe to argue that self and identity are two separate entities, but self always precedes and produces identity. And individuals use their identities during interaction with others. For example, the interaction between a student and a professor does not occur between the student self and professor self, but occurs between two separate identities who are aware of their existence, their separate roles, and their distinct social statuses, which are assigned to them through mutual agreements between society and self. Put differently, let's assume that this particular interaction does not involve any academic contents, and let's say it takes place about a financial transaction where the student is the seller and the professor is the buyer. Then to Stets and Burke (2003), the selves would take on different identities. So the identity is not a set, concrete entity, on the contrary, it is very flexible and it can change according to its environment, context, and expectations from the counter part, whether it may be the society, a group, or other identities just like itself.

As could be inferred from the above paragraph, identities are meaningful after an interaction of some sort with other identities. And Burke (1980) calls the other party as "counter-

identity”. Counter-identity does not mean the opposite or conflicting identity, to him, it simply addresses the counterpart of the identity. Counter-identities give the identity the chance to observe and evaluate itself, as was mentioned by Cooley’s (1902) looking-glass self theory, and re-form its identity to the mutual advantage of the society and itself.

These statements bring a very important and yet difficult-to-answer question to our minds. Does individual not have any control or authority over the behavioral patterns that his or her identity requires? Stets and Burke (2003) believe that in order to be able answer this question thoroughly we need to evaluate two inseparable aspects of identity: structure and agency. **Structure**, as could be inferred, represent the external and structural factors that are influential over identity. Examples to them could vary from the impact of institutions to groups that exist in the society. And as could be guessed, individuals do not have absolute control or even choice over their behavioral options in here. So the teachers’ identity and behavioral patterns are set in a class setting, and if you act against those patterns or deviate from them, you will face sanctions created by the structure (society) for violating the norms, mores and/or folkways. Sanctions for violators may vary from a negative look to capital punishment depending on the severity of the violation. And there is no need to mention that society will be the judge to assess this severity through specific institutions created for this purpose, such as the whole criminal justice system. However, when we start thinking about the **agency** we realize that agents do feel freedom of choice. Knowing that they cannot alter the set structural norms and behavioral patterns, agents realize that using their imagination and creativity they can choose any behavioral options they want. The only condition that they need to fulfill is their option needs to be within the borders of the structure. Actually, it is where we start seeing original practices. And to the researcher, it is exactly that moment where catchphrases like “even one (revolutionary) individual can change the world” start making sense.

In short, seeing identities as ascribed statuses over which individual agents do not have any control becomes a mistake at best. Being aware of a group membership, having the desire to be a member of a group, or even being forced to enter a group have tremendous impact over the *self* in its quest to forming its *identity*. Self uses inner and outer dynamics to form an identity that is approved and confirmed by the structure (group or society).

In sum, self and identity have always been sources of interest for sociology and social psychology. There are several theories elaborating on identity and identity formation process. Most theories start with making a distinction between social identities and individual identities. Many theories have been developed to investigate how individuals in the society become a member, or get rejected by the group. And consequently the question of “how can we understand the identity formation process?” becomes the next question that bothers scholars so far. Many scholars

searched scientific and testable answers to this and many other related questions. Stets and Burke, (2003) believe that we can break theories of identity in three different categories: the ones that explain identity with group's membership; the ones explaining identity with the roles that one occupies; and the ones explaining identity from a more personal perspective. From now on the paper will talk about them separately.

Identity Theory

Sociology is one of the rare sciences that have multiple explanations for identity (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Due to sociology's arguable totalistic nature, some sociological perspectives see identity as the result of a collectivist process. So the identity becomes the offspring of the culture (Nagel, 1995). As was touched on the structure vs. agency argument, these views alone are incapable of observing the full impact of agency (self) in identity forming process. On the other hand, Stets and Burke (2000) claim that some sociologists take on a more symbolic interactionist perspective and assign more power on agency (self) over the structure (society) in this process. Actually, identity theory has its root in this tradition (Stets and Burke, 2003). Symbolic interactionism is one of the main theories in sociology with micro level emphasis. This perspective takes into account the importance of symbols, and individual level interactions in individuals' interpretation of the self, and therefore formation of identity. So it is normal that we could find proponents of the significance of both *structure* and *agency* within identity theory. Serpe and Stryker (1987) represent the former view (structure), while Tsushima and Burke (1999) represent the latter view (agency). Without totally discarding the influence of shared cultural factors, they (Tsushima and Burke, 1999) claim that internal dynamics are more influential on self and its behavioral choices.

Stets and Burke (2000) believe that identity formation process begins with a self categorization in which individuals realize and internalize the roles that were expected from them. After incorporating their selves with these identities, the interaction with other identities and structures begin. Actually, with that interaction identities start recognizing the existence of other identities as occupants of social roles just like themselves, and a constructive relationship begins. By constructive, the researcher does not necessarily mean a positive relationship, but a self merging process is intended. In other words, the self with its new identity starts becoming or learning to become the individual that his or her group wants him or her to be. So the nature of the group becomes the defining indicator of the new identity of the self. For example, if the group that self is trying to incorporate itself with is a criminal group, then the self will find a way to justify and internalize their way of life. Goffman's (1961) explanation of the resocialization into total institutions reveals this problematic aspect of identity shaping process.

Another form of identity theory is developed by McCall and Simons (1978). They also believe that identity formation process begins with the self's realization of its role assigned to him or her through a collective process undertaken by the *agent* (himself or herself) and the *structure* (society or group). One of the unique aspects of this form of identity theory is its emphasis on the different types of identity roles of the self. According to this form, to better understand the identity formation process, one needs to differentiate the separate hierarchical aspects of the identity roles, which was called *hierarchy of prominence* (McCall and Simons, 1978). To these researchers prominence of identity could be measured by three characteristics of individual actors.

- 1- The degree of support that self is receiving from others to shape its identity.
- 2- The degree of self's commitment to the identity that he or she accepts and was given by the structure.
- 3- The degree of *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* rewards that he or she is given by the structure and other identities for submitting to their norms and accepting their supremacy over his or her identity formation process (McCall and Simons, 1978).

Higher levels in the scale of the above mentioned indicators means higher amounts of group acceptance of the new member, and in return higher levels of group participation. To the researcher, higher amounts of participation and acceptance from the group will result higher levels of internalization of the norms and activities of the host group. This reciprocal process demonstrates the cyclical nature of identity formation. And it is not only used by the group on new comers, also this cyclic process is applied on existing group members to adjust them to the changing norms and perspectives in the group. For example, due to external and in some cases internal interventions, criminal groups might need to adjust themselves to a newly emerging environment, and they also need their followers not only to adjust to it, but also internalize new rules for the survival of the group. Terrorist organizations are other good examples to that. Each member of terrorist organizations is being evaluated in a similar process. And members are helped/forced to adjust newly emerged conditions.

According to hierarchy of prominence, if the group offers higher roles and support to a member, this will increase levels of commitment to the cause of the group by the individual. And afterwards the sanctions will start playing crucial roles. By sanctions, one should not solely understand punitive measures. Sanctions, according to Henslin (2007: pg. 46), are “expressions approval or disapproval given to people for upholding or violating norms”. Therefore, reducing them down only to punishments would be ignoring their positive encouragement nature. Therefore, to McCall and Simons (1978), extrinsic and intrinsic rewards (to Henslin positive sanctions) given as a token for their surrender to the will of the group are actually tools to get new

recruits and/or to keep old members in line and adjust them to new necessities. However, we should keep in mind that the group's survival and existence is always of the utmost importance. When the group has a conflict with the individual, the group is always favored and individuals are seen as sacrificable assets.

McCall and Simons (1978) also think that a successful enactment of a role is always contingent upon the quality of the negotiation with others. According to them, successful enactment of the role is always the result of the negotiations with the matching *counter-identity*. So let's suppose that your given identity role is teacher, then a successful enactment of your role as a teacher depends on the negotiations with the counter-identity holders, which are, in our case your students. The importance of negotiations become more evident in leadership studies, where leaders need the input of the ones whom they meant to lead.

Stryker (1980) offers a similar version of this type of identity theory, where he proposes *salience hierarchy* instead of *prominence hierarchy* of McCall and Simons (1978). To Stets and Burke (2003), main difference between the two is evident where former focuses on how individuals play their roles in a situation, while the latter one tends to focus on individual *values* and their affect over identity formation. To Stryker and Serpe (1994) one cannot overlook the importance of the values and their influence over individuals' behavioral choices and their identity formation process. However, to them we also need to include the *situational constraints* that have negative effect over them. To sum, as cited in Stets and Burke (2003) *salience hierarchy* and *prominence hierarchy* should be kept as two distinct concepts with different connotations (Stryker, 1980).

There are many similarities with McCall and Simon's identity theory and Stryker's identity theory, but still one can find nuances between them. The idea of commitment is present in both versions of the theory. However, the role of commitment is much more evident in identity formation in Stryker and Serpe (1982), especially with the research where they studied religious identity roles. And in the end, they claimed that the commitment to a religious role had a defining tie with the relationships in other identity roles, such as friend, father, teacher, etc. This is explained in sociological literature as the power of master status, which cuts across every other statuses that that particular individual might have. If the individual believes that he was given his present identity due to his commitment to religion, then other identity roles will inevitably be affected by it. Any deviation in the amounts of commitment to religion will have a determining impact over other identity roles. Just like an Al Qaeda member's declining commitment to group's norms will inevitably result in lowering of his rank or even might result in his being expelled from the organization.

Multiple Identities

The literature revealed that self tends to have more than one identity. However, we should not overlook the fact that most of the time it has one master identity that shapes or at least influences other identities that that particular individual occupies. To some social scientist having multiple identities is good for the individual (Thoits, 1986 and Linville, 1987) since it offers alternative solutions to the problems of daily life, gives meanings to what's happening around the self and provides guidance in the choice of appropriate behaviors. However one must not overlook the fact that mental stability and health mostly depend on the nature of the identities that that self possess. If those identities are in conflict with the mainstream in a way that they are not compatible to and approved by the society, then having such multiple identities will have the opposite impact over the self. This time it will create tension in self's dealings with mainstream society, while on the other hand it might still provide a healthy relationship in its in-group dealings. For example, let's think about a suicide bomber in Al Qaeda. Due to his task of killing others while killing himself, this individual will need to have a strictly different mindset not only from the mainstream society but also from the majority of other in-group members. It is apparent that his identity will be dramatically incompatible and disapproved by the society. Whenever this individual's identity is exposed to or even guessed by others, he will face dire oppositions from societal institutions, especially from criminal justice system. In addition, his interactions with the society bear the risk of self realization of his identity's dark sides, and might spark off a self questioning process as a suicide bomber.

That's why these individuals are kept in isolation and/or being trained (brainwashed) much more extensively and frequently than other in-group members. In short, his identity as suicide bomber will limit his interaction with the society, where most individuals gain socially accepted identities, or at least gain the opportunity to see socially accepted identities. So, so much for being a part of the society. But this is not all for suicide bombers, his identity as suicide bomber is still different even from his fellow Al Qaeda members. But this time his identity difference will not cause tension as it did with the society, but will win respect and a higher status within the group.

Also, having an identity that enables individuals' interference and control over the structure provides the self with a feeling of belonging/attachment, which, according to Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* (1943), is essential for the existence of the self. After evaluating and examining this, Burke (2001) claimed that having multiple identities provides different consequences for individuals who occupy different structural positions (identities). He compares individuals who have coordinator identities with individuals without coordinator roles, and claims that the ones with

coordinator identities are more aware of organizational activities and therefore they become more participating members in the group. On the other hand, the ones without coordinator roles still develop a sense of attachment to the group, but their levels of participation are dramatically lower than the former group. Therefore to Burke (2001) the nature and/or power of the identities define the level of group encouragement for the individual's participation in group's affairs and consequently developing a sense of belonging.

So what type of relationship that identity and the society have? As was explained above, identities are assigned directly or indirectly by the groups and institutions in the society. They gain their meanings and statuses through their interactions with the society. That's why Stets and Burke (2003) claim that individuals, in all their dealings try to verify their existence. This means, people are social organisms, and cannot live in constant isolation. Also, they believe that individuals can only survive if they fulfill the identity roles that they were assigned. Even the individuals who dramatically differ from the society and could easily be named as outcasts, one still can see an attachment to the ones whom he or she believes alike. Members of organized crime groups, terrorists, and other criminals could be counted here as examples. Individuals perpetuate their identities through interacting with others. Outcome of these interactions are used as feedbacks for the individual in order to maintain his or her existence with that identity. In short, identity standards that were created out of interaction with others (other identities, society, and groups) become tools for controlling the individual in the society (Burke & Cast, 1997). These standards are used as measuring ropes for one's compatibility with the identity that was given to him or her.

Two basic questions follow this argument. Is identity change possible especially with these predetermined identity standards and how does identity theory explains that change process? According to identity theory, identity change is always possible (Burke, 1997; Tsushima and Burke, 1999). Tsushima and Burke (1999) divide the identity standards into two related subgroups: principle-level identity standards and program-level identity standards. Principle-level identity standards represent a higher level control standards than program-level identity standards. As was mentioned by Stets and Burke (2003) they consist of "abstract goals, values, beliefs, and ideals". Whereas, program-level identity standards consist of more concrete goals which could be achieved in real life scenarios. An example would show not only the difference between the two, but also the nature of the relationship they have with each other. Let's think about a teacher again. Some teachers might choose to be more principle-oriented and desire their students to achieve ideal student roles such as being more creative in abstract thinking, and become very successful individuals in the future etc. However, others might choose to be more program-oriented and might think future success will come through short-term goal achievements, such as passing tests,

reading the material provided for the class, writing informative papers, etc. On the first look, these two views might be seen as agents of status quo, but when we integrate the two, we realize the potential for change. Namely, when the teachers who have broader goals (successful students with creative thinking) in their minds also include short term goals (writing good papers, passing tests) there comes the success, and possibly a healthy change in identity.

Kiecolt (1994) also examines the process of identity change. She claims that identity change mostly occurs in the presence of a stressor that changes one or more identities that individual has. A life changing event such as the death of a very rich father could be a stressor. According to her, one of the main characteristics of these events is their power to force or encourage individuals to make a new cost-benefit analysis. In other words, an individual after encountering a stressor of this sort will evaluate his or her identity and will calculate the advantages of having the identity as it was, change it or even abandon it. After receiving a lucrative inheritance money, the decision to maintain the identity of a doctoral student becomes real problematic. If the individual decides to discard this identity, most probably society will not oppose it, so the identity change will be achieved without any social resistance.

According to Kiecolt (1994) there are three ways for identity changes.

1- Individuals can do it by possessing new identities or abandoning one or more old ones.

2- Any change in the perceived importance of the identities that that individual has will also create a change. But the important part in here is the change only needs to be in the importance level, not in the perceived ranking of identities of the individual.

3- This time the change we see in the above statement will occur in both the importance level and in the ranking of that particular identity. By doing that, individuals also change the meaning of that identity.

To Kiecolt (1994) in all of the three ways identity change becomes inevitable.

Social identity theory

This theory chooses to focus on self, identity, and identity formation from a more group membership perspective. According to the theory, group membership and activation of the self by this group (acceptance and approval) are sufficient to explain the formation of identity. The category or group membership will provide an understanding to the self that he or she is part of a group and should associate himself or herself with that group and needs to act accordingly (Stets and Burke, 2003). According to social identity theory, this awareness will encourage/force

individuals to learn the structure, dynamics of the group and change themselves to better fit in. It is at that point where we see the emergence of in-group and out-group concepts.

The self will associate itself with the ones whom she thinks similar to her, and will label them as “in-group”, while the ones who are not members of her group will be labeled as “out-group” persons. According to Abrams and Hogg (1988) while creating a sense of belonging, this self categorization and self comparison also creates the concept of “other” which will be used to boost the group identity formation process. This “other” or “out-group” notion is also used by the group to maintain its existence by creating a tension to provide a sense of uniqueness to its followers. An organized crime group or terrorist organizations are good examples to that. Terrorist group with political and/or religious agendas need to differentiate itself and their ways of resolving existing problems. This will distinguish them from other social entities and have them stand out on the list.

Turner et al (1987) claim that intergroup relationships and comparisons between themselves (the in-group) and others (the out-groups) are the major sources for identity formation. To them this process resembles to ethnocentrism. According to Henslin (2007: pg. 37) ethnocentrism is “the use of one’s own culture as a yardstick for judging the ways of other individuals or societies, generally leading to a negative evaluation of their values, norms, and behaviors”. This will help group members to cluster around basic and fundamental values of the group. It will also encourage or even force in-group members to see the things happening around the individual from that group’s perspective. In other words individuals will cease to have personal opinions and will become a reflection of the group.

Simon, Panteleo, and Mummendey (1995) take our attentions to the importance of homogeneity for groups. According to social identity theory, in order to maintain their existence, groups need to have members who have similar outlook to life and to the events happening to them. And they claim that when individuals do not feel the need to distinguish themselves from other in-group members the homogeneity of the group tends to be higher. Hogg and Hardie (1992) talks about the consequences of homogeneity and state that individuals who tend to identify themselves with the group also tend to have strong connection with the group and believe that their personal attachments and values are of secondary importance. The status of the group in the society does not change this. Even in a very low level group, once the membership is activated and internalized by the member, people tend to ignore the criticisms coming from the rest of the society and still choose to fulfill the requirements of their allegiance. Again terrorist groups become good examples to that. Members, knowing the lower social status of the group and rejection of most of their ideals, still choose to operate and remain as members. This could show us the power

of group over individual. According to *social identity theory*, uniformity, not only in perception, but also in action becomes the natural outcome of group membership. As could be observed, the meaning of individuals, individual differences, power of individual and the significance of relationships among members are pretty much ignored and/or downsized. According to Stets and Burke (2000) group identities of the group is always made operative and desired even at the risk of losing individual identities.

However, this does not mean that social identity theory totally overrides the individual actors' existence in groups. This theory sees individuals as actors in a group who strive to increase their group memberships. They call this type of identity as "salient social identity". As cited in Stets and Burke (2000), to Oakes (1987: pg. 118) salient identity means the "one which is functioning psychologically to increase the influence of one's membership in that group on perception and behavior". Therefore, that would be fair to claim that individuals strive to increase their memberships through behavior and action just to remain as members. Because, unlike role identity theorist, individuals in groups act according to the norms of the group just to increase their membership of the group not their statuses (roles). Actually, this statement became one of the major targets for both identity theorists (role identity theorists), and personal identity theorists. Social identity theorists strongly believe that members always try to possess and increase psychological significance of group membership (Oakes, 1987).

Another important aspect of social identity theory is its requirement of a certain amount of *depersonalization* from its members. According to this theory, depersonalization means losing one's personality in favor of group's existence. In other words, individuals see their achievements as rewards of their membership to the group, and start seeing them as group's achievements and not theirs. At that point, membership to the group becomes *the* major goal, and the roles that individuals take on within that group become less important. This might seem very idealistic in nature. And actually, including the researcher, it might also be seen unrealistic and unachievable. As a criticism, most groups even terrorist group need in-group members who are distinguished from others due to their hard work and sacrifices. They need these distinguished members to set example to other in-group members. Suicide bombers could be better examples to include in this argument. They are always given a special place within the organization, and their funerals always include some sort of different rituals from even other in-group members', and in some groups the social statuses of their families move upwards. Even at the risk of conflicting with the teachings of their religion, these individuals are being assigned to a higher place (martyrdom) after their deaths.

Personal identity theory

As was stated earlier, identity formation and identity as a concept have three pillars: the group, the role, and the person. In sociology and social psychology the meaning of individual as one person is arguably underestimated. Sociologists and social psychologists left topics that are related only to one individual to another science (psychology). However, that does not mean that individuals are totally ignored in these two sciences. These two sciences extensively study the impacts of individual on society, society on individual, and also the process and outcomes of these interactions. So, maybe a more fair statement would be sociology and social psychology left individual-individual level affairs to psychology and eagerly included individual-institutional affairs. Each tradition in sociology (functionalist, conflict, symbolic interaction, and exchange) does impose different meanings to individuals, but the commonality among them is their assumption that individuals are not autonomous agents, but they are agents of the society. Therefore, in order to better understand personal identity theory, one must unshackle the chains of sociology and always leave a window open for other sciences, especially to psychology.

To Hitlin (2003: pg. 118) “personal identity is an underanalyzed level of the self”. Two theories lead the way to explain person’s self conception, identity, and identity formation. Identity theory (Stryker, 1980), explains above mentioned concept with the roles that were taken on by the individual, while social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) explains it with group membership and its impact on these concepts (identity and identity formation).

According to Rieber (1998) personal identity theory explains self and identity using the personal characteristics that are found in the identity of a person. Personal identity theory is very useful in seeing the affects of personal characteristics which were somewhat ignored by social identity theory and (role) identity theory. Of course this view has not been mentioned directly in any of the major sources, however, while reading between the lines of Stets and Burke, (2003) one can easily observe the discrepancy of the allocated spaces for personal identity theory in favor of the other two. However, to Prentice, (2001) holistic understanding of self (Dewey and Mead) is being replaced by more fragmented understanding of self. To her, the tide is turning towards the personal identity theory.

As cited in Hitlin (2003), Hewitt (1999: pg. 93) defines the personal identity as “a sense of self built up over time as the person embarks on and pursues projects or goals that are not thought of as those of community, but as the property of person. Personal identity thus emphasizes a sense of autonomy rather than of communal involvement”. Baumeister (1986) posits this view and supports it with a historical look. According to him, Western societies underwent dramatic transformations in which society ended up providing individuals with a broader private space by dividing human life as public and private spheres. Public life is the open-to-public part of human

life and societal observation and control are always welcome. On the other hand, private life, as could be guessed from its very name, is the closed and secret aspect of human life, where society's control and oversight are limited. Baumeister (1986) claims that this transformation took place around sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and before that time public lives were more prevalent and approved by the then societies. Being granted a broader private space, individuals had the opportunity to develop a private self of their own.

Although somewhat evolved, but the ultimate question still remains. What kind of personal characteristics that individual has, which are isolated from his or her roles or location in a group setting, might result in identity formation? First of all, we need to mention that coming across with scholars who are proponents of explaining identity formation using only individual characteristics is extremely difficult, if not totally impossible. However, there are many scholars like Hitlin, Burke, Baumeister, Prentice, and Stets who claim that identity and identity formation have three interrelated pillars: roles, group membership, and personality. As the representative of personal identity part, Hitlin (2003) strongly believes that *values* have the potential to make the difference in our quest to unearth personal input in identity formation. And he claims that (Hitlin, 2003; pg. 121) "personal identity is produced through value commitments." Gecas (2000) and Hitlin (2003) think alike on the role of values in identity formation. Although Hitlin claims that he believes more strongly than Gecas that values are principal concepts in personal identity. The values established by the society (culture) and the individuals internalization of them result in, as Hitlin (2003: pg. 122) puts it, "a reflexive constructions of various role-, group-, and value identities".

Seligman and Katz (1996) examine the role of values in human's role of orienting themselves to their environments and other situations. They believe that this will create "situated identities". They think that there are two ways that we can see how values and situations work together and form identity.

- 1- Values are operative in situations that have the potential to shape individual's perceptions; and accordingly their behavior choices.
- 2- Also, values might encourage individuals to be in a situation which is more suitable.

The latter one is especially significant in explaining the input of personal values in group membership decisions. For example, according to Seligman and Katz (1996), a member of terrorist group is a member because his values encourage him to be in these kinds of situations. Meaning, his or her value set will pave the way for the membership.

However, Schwartz (1992: pg. 21) describes values as "goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other entity". One might easily criticize this

statement and claim that goals are also socially constructed, just like values. However, Hitlin (2003) clarifies this and explains the nuance. He is not concerned with the construction of values itself, the aspects he is concerned is the impact of values on personal identity formation, and explanation of personal differences in attitudes and behavior. For example, Hitlin (2003) uses the value of “open-mindedness” as a self value, but he wishes to focus on the personal impact and outcomes of being “open-minded” in different situations. To him, values have tremendous influence on attitudes of the self, but it has a somewhat limited impact over the behavior.

So what are the factors that result in different behavioral choices even after having the same set of values as others? Is it environmental factors, group membership, assigned roles, or personal characteristics? To most researchers it is all of the above, but Hitlin and other proponents of personal identity theory believe that personal factors also explain some of the differences in the behavioral variations. But one must always keep in mind that most scholars approach this topic as discreetly as possible in order not make simplistic statements. Hewitt’s (1989) perspective on personal identity is one of the closest ones with elements of each perspective. Hewitt (1989: pg. 179) defines personal identity as “a sense of continuity, integration, identification, and differentiation constructed by the person not in relation to a community and its culture but in relation to the self and its projects”.

All of these explanations and different perspectives on personal identity and identity formation bring another fundamental question to mind. How does this theory explain identity change? Actually, the answer to this important question became evident as we examined the importance of values in personal identity formation. One of the basic properties that values have is their flexibility. Values are subject to change, transformation, reform, and even revolution. Accordingly, as the values that have been professed by the society change, so does the individual. However, one must always bear in mind that these changes do not have to be on societal level at all. Some dramatic events might as well cause value changes on personal levels. The nature of value changes and under which circumstances they occur is not the concern of this paper. But when they do occur, possessing individual will find himself in a state where he also needs to change in order to be consistent with reflexive image of himself in his mind. Hitlin (2003) explains this relationship between identities and behaviors on personal identity change and claim that “personal identity shapes- but also is shaped by- our other identities and behaviors” (Hitlin, 2003: pg. 122).

On the other hand, Swidler (1986) is critical about the importance which was allocated to *values* as explanations of personal identity, identity change, and identity formation by some scholars. She strongly believes that explanation of identity phenomenon from a value perspective is over-deterministic, and leaves some other important factors out, such as the impact of relationship

among values of individual. According to her, values are significant factors as long as they bear any meanings to the possessing individual. In other words, if the individual does not allocate behavior changing meanings to the value, that value will become of no importance and eventually will be useless. In short, she wishes to take our attentions to the very nature of the values and their meanings to the self. She claims that one value's interaction with other values is the major determinant of the personal identity. For example, in a war situation, the value of human life will be overridden by the new and more dominant meaning of war and killing the enemy for the good of the society or group that you are a part of. Put differently, the value of compassion towards your in-group members will supersede the value of compassion towards out-group members.

Conclusion

Intensive literature review yielded that there are three basic angles that scholars approach to identity and identity formation. The first one is from a social identity perspective, where identity as a concept is explained through group membership. According to the proponents of the second perspective (identity theory) identity is a phenomenon which could be explained away using the roles that individuals take on or are assigned. The third theory (personal identity) theory somewhat differs from the first two in its priority of placing bulk of the importance over the values.

This theory sees the functional importance of personal values in situations that might cause changes on the self. There are as much similarities as differences among these three theories of identity. However, social identity theory and identity theory seem to be more alike and not only the researcher but also many concerned scholars like Stets, Burke, and Hitlin believe that these two theories need to merge together in order to better provide us with a broader scope and outlook on identity.

However, the third theory (personal identity theory) is also significant since it provides an individual look and draws our attentions to personal inputs in identity formation process. Actually, that could be a very exiting and a demanding challenge for scholars to merge not only the first two theories (social identity and identity theory), but also all three of them (including the personal identity theory).

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