

Difficult to define identity sociology essay



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Question 6: Discuss why is it difficult to define identity?

The best way to characterize identity may be to see it as " a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing blend and clash" (Sarup, 1996, p. 25). Approaches to identity are multiple and from various fields such as sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis. This vast array of theories offer as many different attributes and definitions to identity which prevent the

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construction of a simple definition. I will argue that identity cannot be reduced to a simple and unified definition. This is most evident by understanding and analyzing the broad differences and interconnectedness between the major theories on identity, such as psychoanalysis, symbolic interactionism and performativity, which all have something to offer, each focusing more on the aspects that are relevant for their field of study.

The wish to define identity can be traced back to the Enlightenment philosophy in Europe, when humanism and the quest to find who we are and how we should behave as rational and free beings (Mansfield, 2000, p. 15). Identity was then studied as a philosophical construct, and the theories, influenced by Descartes and his notion of duality of the human mind between an emotional self and a rational thoughts as constituting our identity, led to believe the subject as being ' I think therefore I am' (Sarup, 1996, p. 46). This Cartesian approach considering the self as unified stayed the main view for many years. However we now live in a post-Cartesian world, and the development of fields such as psychoanalysis, sociology and social psychology led to a shift in the way to look at identity, by decentralizing the subject (Sarup, 1996, p. 46) to take into account different evolution of society and the complexity of human beings.

With the development of psychoanalysis, initiated by the researches and theories of Sigmund Freud, the approach to the study of identity changed focus and meaning. Freud believed that most of our identity is based upon the result of the negotiation of actions and reactions between the individual and the external environment (Elliott, 2007, p. 53), such as the family, culture and society. According to him, we are not born with an identity, but <https://assignbuster.com/difficult-to-define-identity-sociology-essay/>

we construct one through the process of identification. This is especially true in the early ages of your life when you learn what is acceptable according to social criteria and what has to be prevented, which is then repressed according to Freud into the unconscious; the Oedipus complex is a good example of structuring the subject in terms of identification (Sarup, 1996, p. 30). It is the result of these interactions which will define who we are. It is important then to notice that for Freud one's identity construction is mostly unconscious and resides within oneself (Lawler, 2008, p. 78); the focus is, as such, placed on the individual and his capacity to adapt and positively interact with the world.

Following psychoanalytic traditions, academics such as Eissler theorized the sense of identity as being based on memory elements which in turn depend on the capacity of the ego to consider these memories as its 'own', and be then able to either repress or integrate them successfully (De Levita, 1965, p. 106). Stephanie Lawler, also on memory, argues that identity is not something fundamental and essential, but something produced through the narratives people use to explain and understand their lives (Lawler, 2008, p. 17). As such they use their memories to interpret their lives, and at the same time these memories are already interpretations of a past experience: memories themselves are social products.

What psychoanalysis can bring to the study of identity is that it gives a way to consider the place of unconscious and non-rational elements of identity (Lawler, 2008, p. 83) which are psychoanalytic elements that are necessary to understand the construction of identity but which are often denied by theorists exploring social dynamics impacts (Sarup, 1996, p. 39).

Furthermore, by placing the unconscious and ideas of repression at the centre of his model of identity, Freud shows that we can only know ourselves incompletely and with difficulty, rendering identity blurred and unfinished (Lawler, 2008, p. 99). However, by concentrating so much on the self's experience of identity, this approach might lack depth in understanding the impact of some social forces such as inequality, oppression and domination (Elliott, 2007, p. 70).

Another approach that developed around that time but in the sociological field, is the theory known as symbolic interactionism. Largely influenced by Mead's theory, it gives less importance to the individual than psychoanalysis and in contrary concentrates on the effects of interactions between the social reality and an individual. In fact, Mead believes that a subjective self is fashioned and shaped by the cooperative interaction with the world and others. It is indeed through the use of symbols - which meanings we learn and understand thanks to experiences, to languages, values and culture - and according to our surrounding environment that we are constructing our identities (Elliott, 2007, p. 32). In other words, according to Mead, we make sense of ourselves only by the time we make sense of the world and others around us, by developing a sense of difference and recognition through symbols such as language. As such, it is necessary to distinguish between the " I", representing the internal needs, feelings, wishes and the " me", representing the socialized self, which appears in reaction to what we see around us (Carriera Da Silva, 2007, pp. 51-59): it is the consciousness of ourselves we develop in reaction to developing a sense of others, a differentiation from them.

Something common with psychoanalysis is the importance of childhood in development of the sense of self, as Mead believes in the importance of the processes of 'play' and 'game' in becoming a healthy mind which can interact with others and society (Carriera Da Silva, 2007, pp. 48-51).

However Strauss, who on that aspect shares symbolic interactionists view, rejects the idea that the self is determined only through early childhood, and would then be static, and in contrary argues about a theory of adult identity change (Musolf, 2003, p. 167) showing that we are flexible beings, and are continuously socialized into new identities (Musolf, 2003, pp. 77, 170).

Finally, Strauss's theory incorporates the structural influences on social behaviors that he believes are neglected in the basic theory. Language is very important, with for example our names being the first act of self-introduction and as such functions as a social object by which others may initially typify us (Musolf, 2003, pp. 164-165).

However, symbolic interactionism has been accused of being too rationalistic, cognitive and conscious, and indeed seems to have little recognition of the relation between desire, wishes, fantasies and social control that is argued in psychoanalysis (Elliott, 2007, p. 35).

Later on, approaches started to focus more on how identity functioned to try and explain what it is. This is the case of Anthony Goffman who, departing from symbolic interactionism, believes in the strategic performativity of the self in everyday life as constituting different identities for ourselves where the social sphere therefore represents a stage where we have to act an identity (Lawler, 2008, p104). Our self is reflected to the world as a façade, and the individual is " the creative and reflective agent who decides - and in

doing so constitutes self identity – on how to carry out such roles as well as the staging of role performances” (Elliott, 2007, p. 38). We therefore have a set of identities for which we know how to perform and what expectations people have of them, and we are constantly constraint to be on display and perform, as well as adding roles to adapt to every situation (Musolf, 2003, p. 164).

Taking further Goffman’s performativity, Mills argues that the performing self appeared as a result of the structural transformation of society into a bureaucratic consumerist one, and that it leads to the disappearing of real bonds in society replaced by a ‘ cash nexus’ as the only uniting element (Musolf, 2003, pp. 164, 172).

Goffman takes some distance from symbolic interactionism however as he focuses on interactions and as such gives no importance to the difference between the I and the me; this leads to questioning the presence of a real self existing outside such practices – the real identity of the ‘ I’, hiding behind the personae and roles people assume, but he seems to leave undeveloped this aspect of the theory, concentrating on studying the façades we show and not the true identity we might have behind it (Hetherington, 1998, pp. 150-151). As such theorists like De Levita have interpreted that for Goffman, the roles we play do not hide anything comparable to what Jung would argue (1965, p. 132). According to Jung, the persona regroups the totality of the roles which a certain individual fulfils and portrays to the world, a similar idea to Goffman’s performance but their ideas shift as for defining the place of identity in this schema. Indeed it is explicit for Jung that the persona only is a ‘ shield’ for our true identity (De <https://assignbuster.com/difficult-to-define-identity-sociology-essay/>

Levita, 1965, p. 132) which is not so clear for Goffman. In contrary, he argues that the roles/performances are what make us persons; we are constantly acting, but what those roles add up to is our identity (Lawler, 2008, p. 106). Take a lecturer for example; he will act differently while teaching in classes than how he is with his friends over lunch, and even differently than how he will act with his children in the evening. It doesn't mean that he is someone else more true outside of these contexts, or that he is fraudulent about his identity, but that all these roles represent who he is.

Today, with the increasing influence of the media as a social force, Goffman's theory might be more adapted than ever as these media perpetuate performance demands. Indeed, as Altheide argues, our everyday life saturated by the media reshapes identity into "another piece of merchandise that we shall just as advertising promotes corporate products" with which we play as a toy (Altheide, 2000, pp. 13, 20).

Another way of thinking about identity comes from Giddens' theory of reflexivity and social change. Today according to Giddens, people are more self-aware, and therefore can make strategic decision for their future and about who they are or want to be (Giddens, 1991, p. 35). Identity is not passive and has to be reflexively made from a multitude of often competing choices, and the settings of uncertainty and multiple choices render the notions of trust, risk and ontological security central to the reflexive self. Indeed, as Giddens puts it, trust is "at the origin of the experience of a stable external world and a coherent sense of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991, p. 51). His concept considers how in late modernity humans develop a

psychological self and re-focus on their identity, to try and reflect on a sense of self, helped by the many experts, information and advices, largely psychological and sociological (Elliott, 2007, p. 45), which are now available about how we should live our lives, such as self-help books or TV shows like Dr Phil which reminds of what Rose calls the 'psy' complex (Rose, 1999). Therefore our identity becomes what we believe or interpret ourselves to be and how we want to shape ourselves. His way of characterizing individuals as being almost "self-mastering" leads to many critics, considering his theory as too individualistic (Elliott, 2007, pp. 48-49).

Giddens is critical of overly pessimistic accounts of the post-modern self as fragmented (Heaphy, 2007, p. 94). Instead for Giddens, individuals actively participate in forging their self-identities and in doing so contribute to social life in a way that has global implications. Giddens' analysis begins with the premise that all human beings possess an awareness of what they are doing and why they are doing so, and they monitor themselves in producing and reproducing social conventions (Heaphy, 2007, pp. 95, 119). The problem with this approach is that Giddens fails to take into account power relations and the possible lack of choice or the different consequences of choices. As Lash indeed argues, "contradiction and contingency, he suggests, are far more characteristic of the contemporary self than Giddens' theory of reflexivity will allow" and he therefore counsels to use Foucault's insights on power and control where reflexivity's shows limitation (in Heaphy, 2007, pp. 112-113).

To have a greater account of power relation in the creation of identity, one should turn to Foucault and Foucauldian theorists. Foucault's argument is

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that particular kinds of identity are 'made up' within relations of power/knowledge (Lawler, 2008, p. 55). To put it simply, he argues that how we are is an effect of what we know ourselves to be, or in other words, we are addressed, and address ourselves as certain kind of person, and through this process we become that person. Lawler gives the example of the subjectivation of sexuality, showing that we don't understand sexual preference as something we do but as something we are (2008, p. 59). Subjectivation is therefore the idea of becoming subjects by gaining specific identities (Lawler, 2008, p. 62). Foucauldian scholars follow his theory and have argued that society is governed through self-surveillance, initiated by social institutions, to encourage individuals to actively condition and shape themselves according to social norms (Heapy, 2007, pp. 33-34). Another important element is the idea that we are not regulated by the media but regulating ourselves with it, using different means such as counseling or self help books, because of our strive to be a certain type of person in order to be normal, healthy, self-fulfilled (Lawler, 2008, p. 63) which relates to theories previously discussed. According to Rose, the language of psychology provides an important way of constructing one's identity, of identifying one's deepest thoughts, wishes and conflicts (Rose, 1999).

However one of the critic against Foucault's ideas relates to the lack of insight into why people make subjectivation investments in some forms of self-understands and not in others, or also how such understandings come to constitute the self (Lawler, 2008, p. 76).

As we have seen through these renowned examples of how to frame identity, there are many approaches to the study of identity, which define or

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characterize it in different ways, blurring the possibility to give a simple unified definition. Identity is not a thing but a process in constant change of shape and meaning, and that is why it is difficult to grasp it. Because identity is a broad and nebulous concept, it is complex and multiple, and can mean different things depending on your purposes of research and approach. Some of these theories concentrate on how to see the individual from society's perspective, while some others study the positions of these individuals within the society, but what seems common to most of them is the idea that identity plays a role of mediator (Sarup, 1996, p. 28) between the external and the internal, between the self and others.

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Addressing the topic

Excellent

Very Good

Good

Fair

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Poor

Expression of the argument

Engagement with relevant literature

Use of relevant examples

Originality and critical insight

Range of concepts

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