

Is identity personal or social? theories of identity



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“ There is no such thing as ‘ personal identity’ - identity is social.” Drawing upon relevant empirical research, critically evaluate this statement with reference to at least two psychological theories of identities.

Identity can be defined as a distinguishing characteristic, which belongs to any given individual, or shared amongst all the members of a certain social group (Leary & Tangney, 2003). Psychology believes that there are many assets to identity; this essay sets to investigate two specific assets; personal identity and social identity. Personal identities refer to properties of a person such as funny or introvert, whereas social identities refer to the groups that people affiliate themselves with, such as English and carnivore. There are two psychological theories, which explore personal and social identity; the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and the identity theory (Stryker, 1980). This essay approaches the subject that “ identity is social, not personal” with the help of empirical research.

The identity theory is strongly linked with the symbolic interactionist view that society affects social behavior via its influence on self. And thus a person’s personal identity comes from their roles that they play in life (Stryker, 1980). In contrast the social identity theory believes that group membership and intergroup relations is what people base their identity on (Tajfel, 1978). Tajfel suggested that the groups in which people belonged to be an important source of self-esteem and pride, groups give us a sense of social identity.

Tajfel & Turner (1979) proposed that there are three mental processes when we evaluate others as “ us” or “ them”; self-categorization, social

identification and then finally social comparison. Self-categorization is where we categorize people by noting the similarities between in-group members and ourselves, and the differences between out-group members and ourselves. Hoggs and Abrams (1988) believe that we classify groups by different features, for example style of speech, behavioral norms, and attitudes towards particular ideals. And thus once people are in society they derive their identity from the social categories in which they belong to, each person gains a unique set of social categories over their life and so their identity is unique.

The identity theory also believes self-categorization occurs, but calls it identification. Stryker (1980) says that self-categorization is as equivalently important in the formation of an individual's identity, where categorization depends upon a named and classified world. People name each other and themselves in the sense of recognizing each other as occupants of roles. This naming invokes meaning in relation to our plans and activities, and so identity is shaped by group membership or by roles of a person. And so we find similarity between the two theories, of how individuals perceive and take action when they take on a group-base identity.

Tajfel's social identity theory (1978) argues that an individual's behavior and life does not usually mirror their identity, but instead it changes in accordance with social context. For example psychology students established a positive identity when comparing their intelligence to art students, or creativity with physics students, and they felt inferior when comparing their intelligence with psychics students and creativity with art students (Spears et al., 1997). Tajfel and Turner (1979) said that certain <https://assignbuster.com/is-identity-personal-or-social-theories-of-identity/>

factors affect how individuals define themselves, factors such as; the stability of group statuses, the permeability of group boundaries and the legitimacy of current status relations. Research confirms this as it shows that people were more motivated to identify themselves as group members when group status was unstable, as it endorsed social change and intergroup competition. Whereas the individual level of self-definition was more prominent when the group boundaries were permeable (Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 2002). And so these findings suggests that social groups do have a big effect on how people perceive themselves, and so personal identity may not be a factor at all or may just be another component in the larger part that is social identity.

There are many examples in the real world that provide evidence for the argument that identity is social, for example stereotyping. Stereotypes are widely shared images of a social group and its members. Kite (2001) believes that it is observable how prejudice is in the generalization about a group's characteristics, it ignores the differences between the individuals in the group, and see's them all as one and the same. Brigham (1986) did research supporting this, as he found that White participants in America stereotyped African Americans more than other white individuals. Slattery (2004) went on to explain this, and said that it is down to people believing hat members in their group have better qualities than people outside of their group. This shows how social identity has a great impact on people, it makes us look at people as a group, tending to focus more on their social identity, rather than them themselves and their personal identity.

Leadership is another real world example showing evidence for the idea that identity is social. Leadership is an important process in the social identity theory. The depersonalization process and the behavior of group members give individuals the power to become leaders. This gives them a different status isolating them from the followers who have similar characteristics in the group. The depersonalization process is where we categorize someone and so we see them as them same as the rest in their group, not as individuals (Hogg, 2001). However Mullen et al. (1989) found that certain personalities such as talkativeness correlate highly with leadership. And thus personal identity may explain why there is a variance in the emergence of leaders in leaderless groups (Kenny & Zaccaro, 1983).

If you also look into World War II, it provides evidence for social identity. The social identity theory explains how the Nazi's behaved, as people were assigned to Hitler's German Nazi Party, they began to think of it as their in-group. They committed terrible acts of violence against other out-groups, showing their social identity and lack of personal identity. If they had personal identity, would they not have some sort of regret to the pain they caused to their own friends and neighbors? (Mcleod, 2008). This has not only occurred in Germany with the holocaust, but in the former Yugoslavia between the Bosnians and Serbs, and in India between the Sikhs and Hindu's.

However there is evidence taken from research into culture and environment, which provide evidence for the role of personal identity.

Research by Hogg, Terry & White (1995) has found that most of us are birthed into some cultural association, whether it's political, social or

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nationality. These associations have a defined set of accepted behaviors and actions, which establish the defining features of the group. Stryker (2000) says that identity and ethnicity are the same; "the ready-made set of endowments and identifications that every individual shares with others from the moment of birth by the chance of the family into which he is born at that given time in a given place". However this does not explain how adopted children still taken on their foster parents different cultures.

Stryker's key concept in the identity theory is role identity. For example, the parent identity gives the person certain roles they should carry out, such as caregiver, teacher and moral guider. Stryker believes that people have multiple role identities, and they are organized into a hierarchy within that person. However role identity has been criticized quite heavily, as it shows as having a reductionist view of social behavior, it acts on the assumption that there is always consensus, cooperation and continuity in social behavior, it does not take into account disagreements and conflicts.

Stryker's identity theory (1980) uses the concept of identity salience, which is the likelihood that identities will be invoked in a variety of situations.

Identities have two separate requirements, that people are placed as social objects by others assigning position designations and expectations to them, and that they internalize the designations. And so identities are self-cognitions, which are linked to roles. The identity theory believes that commitment impacts identity saliences, which in turn impacts role choice, Stryker & Serpe (1982) did a study supporting this. And found that religious commitment significantly increased religious identity salience, which in turn significantly increased the time spent in a religious role.

Stryker et al. (2005) also found how different leveled social structures assist or constrain the strength of commitments to an individual's role-identity.

They had showed how intermediate-level social structures, such as neighborhoods and schools, influenced commitment the most compared to proximal-based social structures and large-scale stratification systems.

In another study, Nuttbrock and Freudiger (1994) investigated the salience of the mother identity amongst first-time mothers. They had found that a more salient mother identity or the tendency for women to raise the mother identity at school, work or amongst friends encourages behaviors consistent with the mother identity. This shows that there is a causal relationship between identity prominence and identity salience, where an important identity influences the salience of the identity.

Stryker (1980) believes that identities that are based on more relationships will be placed higher on the commitment hierarchies, and that commitments hierarchies reflect social structure. This is because gender, age, ethnicity and social class largely determine the social networks people are born into or may enter. In example, research had found that white middle-class teenagers are more likely than black working-class teenagers to be tracked into college prep-courses, and so are more likely to form more friendships and good student-teacher relationships, which is based on a 'good student identity'. Also the costs of giving up an identity depend on the amount of social ties it is based on. And so the higher in the commitment hierarchy, the more stable an identity is going to be.

Lee (2002) had found support for the identity theory, he had found in concurrent effects of identity variables in science-related activities for boys and girls. More specifically he had found that the greater the affective commitment toward a science identity, the greater the salience of the science identity, and the better then academic performance in science for both boys and girls.

There are many criticisms to Sryker's identity theory (1980), for example he believes that human experience is social organized, that people do not have random experiences but the experiences are strongly impacted by a persons social structures, and these social structures are then likely to bring only certain types of people together. However this is clearly not so as people have the choice to interact with whoever they want, and there may be many random opportunities to interact with people of different social categories.

From looking at how both personal and social identity work separately, it seems they tend to exist simultaneously in the formations of identity. Swann et al. (2009) said that in some instances, personal and social identities become fused in people. And so any events, which trigger personal identity, would also trigger their social identity and vice versa. It is believed that people, who are "fused" with a group, will take extreme actions to protect other group members. Swann et al. (2009) tested Spanish volunteers and had found that people whose identities were fused with Spain were more likely to sacrifice themselves for Spanish people, than those who were not fused. However there are certain aspects to identity function, which have not yet been explored by Swann and his colleagues, such as to why identity fusion occurs at all.

So in conclusion this essay shows that personal identity does play a big role in the formation of identities, as does social identity. I believe it would be worth consideration to merge the identity theory, and social identity theory, as it would create a general theory of the self. Despite the differences in theory they also do have much in common. The differences only occur because one side looks at the view of the group as the basis for identity (who one is) and the other side looks at the view of the role as the basis for identity (what one does)(Thoits & Virshup, 1997). If we put these two separate features together it could become a complete theory of the self. So in answer to the question this essay asks, no, identity is not only social, as personal identity also plays a major role.

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