# Theoretical approaches to identity

Psychology

Psychological theories approach the issue of identity by asking different questions, using different methods and data. They aim to explain the meaning and formation of identity in many distinctive ways. This argument will focus on two of this theories -Psychosocial and Social constructionist, by giving their detailed explanation and concentrating on the dissimilarities between them. Although both theories originate from different traditions and focus on diverse aspects and issues, each one of them contribute a way of thinking about identity.

Psychosocial theory continues the tradition of William James and psychoanalysis. It was developed by Erik Erikson and James Mascia. They consider the importance of personal as well as social factors for identity development. Erikson first saw identity as psychosocial. The methods he used include clinical, naturalistic observations and biographical analysis. He describes identity as " a conscious sense of individual uniqueness... an unconscious striving for continuity... a solidarity with a group's ideals"(1968, p. 208).

He explained identity as a developmental process, as a result of achieving a stable, secure sense of who we are and what we are in the world we exist and share with our community. It is also important that our social group think of us as the same over time. Erikson did some clinical work with the veterans of the Second World War and concluded that we are unselfconscious when our life is not under threat, because we take our identity for granted. However, identity means so much more when we experience that our life is in danger and start thinking about mortality.

Erikson lived through two wars, which explains why identity crisis and confusion was typical for his time. Psychosocialists viewed the achievement of identity as a lifelong process of positive or negative ways of development, which involve conflicts or normative crisis, common to most people, and their resolutions. Erikson divided the identity development on eight stages, where each stage begins from the achievement of the previous one. He focused particularly on the fifth stage -adolescence, as at the end of it we have to achieve ego identity (very clear and stable idea of who we are).

Erikson described the fifth stage as a period of psychosocial moratorium, which means an approved delay for adolescents to make a commitment and be responsible like adults in order to pass to the next stage of adulthood. He argued that identity crisis is inevitable for some young people as they find it very difficult to become adults. The society and the historical period determine the nature of identity crisis. He believed that if we fail to achieve a secure ego, the role diffusion occurs. Erikson argued that the solidarity with the group's ideals is required for our identity achievement.

Therefore, when we experience threats to our identity, we can over-identify with cliques and this may cause aggressive behaviour. James Marcia, followed Erikson's ideas, introducing a new method -semi-structured interview. He studied adolescent's identity. He identifies four identity statuses: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement. Marcia considered the period of adolescence as fundamental for identity and future life stages. He believed that the best pattern to stable identity is from moratorium to identity achievement.

Psychosocial theory consider personal and social as separate systems, which have neglected important social identity, such as: race, gender, social class, nationality and etc. We can find clearer picture of social identities in the social constructionists theories. They originate from different psychological perspective and are important part of a new tradition -the " second cognitive revolution. Because of its diversity, this approach cannot be related to a single author. The meaning of socially constructed identities is based on the idea that identities are socially constructed in everyday life and therefore, they cannot occur naturally.

Social construction is a social process, because everything around us is constructed: our knowledge, relationships, language and interactions with people. History and culture are central to our understanding of this social process. On the other hand, we construct our identities in everyday life through the language we use and the discourses in our society. The power relations in society are also constructed by language. In conclusion, language as well as social relations are fundamental to identity construction, because when we communicate we actively construct identity.

As a social constructionist theorist, Kenneth Gergen can be used as an example to make our picture complete: I grew up with fountain pens. As a child they were as " natural" to me as my family. My father's pen seemed to produce an endless stream of mathematical scribbles that somehow transformed themselves into papers in journals. Meanwhile, my mother's musings gave way to burst of inspirational writing - short stories, travelogues, and the best letters a boy away from home could ever receive.

The pen was destined to become my life. And so it did, as I slowly worked my way toward a professorship in psychology.

I love to ponder and to write; the sound of pen on paper, the flowing of the ink, the mounting columns of " my thoughts" - all produced as special thrill. And wonder of wonders, I could be paid for it! But now the pen is gone. Some years ago I was informed there would be no more secretaries to transform my handiwork into solid print. I was to write by computer. I loathed the idea. Writing was a craft, not a technology; I needed to touch the paper physically; feel the words flowing from fingers to shaft and shaft to " my being made visible". The act of writing was very close to physical contact with the reader.

In contrast, the computer was a wedge between us - a piece of brutish machinery separating our humanity. I refused to purchase a computer. Finally, in frustration, the college administration delivered one as a gift. A goose quill now sits nearby on the desk to remind me of my roots. I use my pen only for signing letters. This machine has virtually transformed my life. It's not simply the ease of writing; there are possibilities for endless experimenting, storing of random ideas, and the like. It also delivers electronic mail and opens the vast horizons of the World Wide Web... Dozens of times daily I receive messages... rom around the world. (Gergen, 1999, p. 1)

Gergen's identity has been actively constructed through his social relations. His passion for writing comes from his admiration of his parent's work and their social status. However, his identity had to change when social and technological changes occurred. Identities are not the same over time, as

they follow the society and relationships changes. Moreover, social constructionists argue that identity is fluid and dynamic, not fixed. As we socially create them, we can give a different explanation to the same story in front of different audiences.

Our identities are defined as multiple, diverse and de-centred and therefore, they cannot be completed by one, " central", " core" identity, as there are always other identities. As a result different identities may contradict themselves. In addition, this theory explains all identities as social and there is no distinction between personal and social identities. Also identities are viewed as resources for everyday interaction. If we go back to the example above, we see that Gergen identity, as pen writer was a resource to stop him using a computer.

Social constructionists explain that there are similarities and differences in identity of people belonging to the same group as well as in people constructed to belong to different group. All identities are constructed in social relations that involve power relations. The methods used in this approach are focused on everyday practices. All studies are completed in natural environment. Social constructionists theories can be criticise if we believe and experience that we have one stable identity through our whole life.

Although social constructionists and psychosocial theories explain the same issue, they differ in many ways. Firstly, they disagree whether our identity is fixed or changes over time. Erikson describes identity as achieved and fixed. Social constructionists believed that is multiple, de-centred and fluid.

Secondly, psychosocialists see the social context as important factor in identity development, but they focus more on the personal aspects of the issue. In opposition, the other theory considers that there is only social identity, no distinction between personal and social.

Language and relationships of power are fundamental to identity construction. On the other hand, Erikson consider as a particularly important for achieving identity, the period of adolescence. Moreover, Erikson believed that it is essential that our social group see us the same over time. The other approach argues that identities experience changes with the society and different relationships. In conclusion, both theories use different methods. Social constructionists focus on outsider and insider viewpoints by analysing everyday discourses.

Psychosocial theory use semi-structured interviews, clinical and naturalistic observations and biographies, which involve outsider viewpoint. Both theories explain identity by answering different questions, by approaching the issue in diverse ways. They give us two contradictive views and follow different directions of how to think about identity. Their task is not to provide one complete and correct answer of the question what is identity, but to make it possible for us by comparing views and following arguments to be as close as possible to understand such a complicated issue as identity.