

KEY CONCEPT: IDENTITY

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Concept origins

Identity as a concept occurs in many **disciplines**, with its take-up within philosophy, sociology, **politics**, anthropology, theology and **psychoanalysis** being particularly prescient for the concept's utilisation within education. Unsurprisingly, usage of the term across these different fields is inconsistent and the resultant polyphony does not always lead to easy or indeed possible integration. Any discussion of identity necessitates an understanding of the closely related notion of the self. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the self has been regarded as an agent who is endowed with awareness of both their own identity and of their degrees of agency and subjective status (Rycroft, 1972). Here identity is predicated on a consciousness of one's self or self-experience across time, with this being more or less coherent and distinct from others. This understanding of the self builds on substantial philosophical work, particularly: (1) Descartes' (1641) search for epistemological certainty during the seventeenth century, which culminated in his 'cogito, ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am) dictum; and (2) Hegel's (1807) very different emphasis on recognition within **relationships** as essential to emergent self-consciousness, a thesis importantly revisited and developed by Honneth (1995).

Current status and usage

The concept has developed as its subject has become more problematic. As du Gay *et al.* (2000) emphasised, modern views of identity have increasingly depicted it as variegated, patchwork and complex. Within **politics** in general and in education in particular, current deployments of the concept of identity involve micro-identities, with **class**, **ethnic** and **gender** vertices and their **intersectionality** being particularly highlighted.

Questions of filiation and belonging, whether, for example, in terms of a notional national identity or in terms of traditional student identities, of engagement with the offered normative narratives, have become increasingly prominent (May, 2013). For education, an important part of the tension here relates to its own competing functional **discourses**: is it elucidatory, maintaining, transformative, challenging to or repressive of student, **teacher** and **institutional** identities?



Identity is about who and what I am, and who and what I am not. This may be initially understood as an amalgam of many internal and external elements. These would include bodily experience, thoughts, fantasy and **imagination**, **gender**, **class**, **race**, **ethnicity**, multi-layered history, habitus, capital, one's jobs or roles, one's **relationships**, values, spirituality, future plans and aspirations. Central to our identity is our life experienced through our own individual consciousness, our sense of self, of 'I' and of 'me'. All this develops over time (Erikson, 1968), being a negotiated interpersonal achievement, one which remains *in-process*. Our own personal identity (how we privately perceive and construe ourselves) and our social identity (how our social worlds frame us) represent a double aspect of our identities (Stevens, 1996). How comfortably these aspects integrate or how much **dissonance** or conflict exists between them is important and can be regarded as a contributor to adjustment and well-being. With education mediating social and political processes (from the **hidden curriculum**, through nationalism, patriarchy, the monitoring of so-called radicalisation, to acceptance of the supremacy of democracy and market **capitalism**), **schooling** can exert a significant formative effect on identity. Processes of **labelling** are essential to consider here. Key theorists, from Durkheim (1897) through Cooley (1902) to Goffman (1963), have emphasised how deviating from cultural norms can attract negative labels, which stigmatise and devalue their recipients, processes exacerbated through sometimes resulting phenomena, such as the **self-fulfilling prophecy** (Merton, 1948). Almost inevitably, processes of educational **assessment**, within which there are winners and losers, cultivate and jeopardise students' identities as learners (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). Relatedly, **ideology** exerts similar influence on students, albeit more insidiously (Illich, 1973).



While **labelling**, the **self-fulfilling prophecy** and **ideology** negatively impact on personal identity (both in and outside education), in an effort to regulate **society** (a functionalist view), correlates such as the Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1992) highlight the potentially positive effect on performance of high expectations. Positive outcomes, of course, impact not only on student identity, but also on **teacher** identity (Zembylas, 2003; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009) and that of the institution (Avest and Bakker, 2007). Considering identities beyond those of students further highlights variation. How *difference* is responded to is here significant, particularly as identity can be constructed in terms of that which one is not (e.g., not black, not female, not Christian, not heterosexual, etc.). Often such clustering thinking is predicated on binary oppositions and a magnification of the significance of minor differences (Freud, 1930; Blok, 1998). Identities thus formed can be precarious and can promote thinking that dehumanises the other; they are not me, not as good, less civilised, and so on as the self (or one's group) is promoted and the other is devalued. The result can be sexist, racialised, denigratory, and other forms of frankly aggressive thinking and **behaviour**. The degree to which there is an active sponsorship or passive complicity in such **cultures** by individuals, institutions and/or the state, as opposed to challenging such thinking and offering an alternative, more nuanced empathic reading of identity of self and other, may be seen not just as a measure of moral standing (see **ethics**) but also of risk.



As suggested previously, just as identity as a concept is disputed territory, so too are identities. In the face of the State's encouragement of normalcy and pressure to adhere to dominant, **hegemonic** identity narratives, these same sets of signification are often met with scepticism and actually command decreasing allegiance. Theoretical responses, such as the psychosocial fragmentation or individualisation theses (May, 2013), tend to emphasise (1) the erosion of so-called traditional certainties on the one hand and (2) new freedom and agency for individual identity creation on the other. The work of Willis (1977; Dolby *et al.*, 2004) offers a classic example of a sub-group critique of education as a middle-**class** project; the 'lads' resistance to subordination and concomitant creation of a counter **school culture**, disqualifies them from **transformation** possibilities, leaving them, instead, apparently choosing traditional low-skilled manual factory work. Such identity construction, Willis argues, rests not so much on a rejection of educational aspiration, but on binaries involving mental/manual labour, **gender** and **race**, alongside a perception of the structural and value

barriers they face in the labour market. While questions of class and agency pervade Willis's argument, race and gender identity (and the **intersectionality** of such dimensions) have increasingly focused critical debates. With a history of **racism** (Mac an Ghaill, 1988) and postcolonial problems, particularly around alienation (Fanon, 1952), negatively impacting on educational attainment, and contemporary anxieties around the Muslim other, traditional education itself has come to be questioned as a colonising **discourse** that distorts identity (Dei and Simmons, 2010; Hoerder, 2014). Similar questions arise in relation to gender identity, with the work of Butler (1990, 1993; Brady and Schirato, 2011), for example, situating gender identity as a cultural performance that is contingent, assumed and the product of identifications. In both arenas, choice can be limited essentially through dominant narratives, resulting in a partial or premature identity, with other possibilities foreclosed.

Questions to consider

1. Thinking about your own life, what are central pillars of your identity? Will these change?
2. How does having a minority status (such as BAME) impact on social identity and the potential constructions of self within **schools**?
3. How does the **gender** identity of a **teacher** figure impact on students?
4. Which theorists and research would you cite in support of your ideas about identity?

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