

Psychosocial Theory of Identity and Social Identity Theory: Outlining strengths and weaknesses of two different psychological approaches to identity

by Patricia Karsten

The concept of identity is often referred to in everyday life, for example in the common notion of 'identity crisis', and several psychological approaches aim at explaining identity and its development. The following discussion focuses on Psychosocial Theory of Identity and Social Identity Theory as two major perspectives on identity. Both theories are presented with their main ideas and findings about identity development, as well as an attempt at evaluating their strength and weaknesses. Both approaches offer insight into personal and social aspects of identity and its development, as will be shown in the following discussion.

Psychosocial Theory of Identity originates with psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1902-94) and was further developed by psychologist James Marcia (Phoenix, 2007). Erikson saw identity as a lifelong developmental process along eight successive stages, from birth to old age. According to him, each stage is characterized by a specific developmental conflict which has to be resolved, if the individual is to progress in healthy identity development. In this succession, adolescence is seen as the most important phase, where the individual goes through an identity crisis trying to find out who he is and what role in society he might occupy in the future. Successful resolution of this crisis results in the achievement of a coherent sense of self, termed 'ego identity', which is embedded in the individual's social context, hence the notion of 'psychosocial identity'. Marcia further explored the adolescence phase and developed the Identity Status Interview as a method to assess adolescent identity development. Based on the two dimensions of 'exploration of choices' and 'commitment', he distinguishes four adolescent identity statuses. Identity diffusion and foreclosure are seen as less developed statuses due to the lack of explorative behaviour. The status of moratorium, where the individual intensively explores possible choices for his personal future without yet committing permanently to them, is seen as important preparation for identity achievement, the most advanced identity status.

The strengths of this approach lie in the view on identity as changing and developing over lifetime, in its systematic assessment of adolescent identity development, and in its potential to explain why adolescents are very strongly influenced by their peer groups. Erikson argues that the threatening feeling of identity loss during adolescence leads to strong identification with their own social group and to intolerant, often cruel behaviour against group outsiders (as cited in Phoenix, 2007, p. 56). Psychosocial Theory has been criticized for its focus on identity crisis as key to identity development, which may be related to Erikson's personal experience, as Friedman points out (as cited in Phoenix, 2007, p. 56). Research findings do not support the ubiquity of identity crisis, they rather support the notion of identity development as a more steady and less critical experience for adolescents (Coleman and Hendry as cited in Phoenix, 2007). Secondly, Psychosocial Theory acknowledges the importance of the social and historical context for identity development, but it does not further explore these aspects of identity, an issue which is addressed by Social Identity Theory (SIT).

With a focus on explaining the development of group identity, Henry Tajfel (1919-82), the founder of SIT, addressed the question which factors determine the individual's identification with a group (Phoenix, 2007). He too distinguished between personal and social identity, and conceptualized social identity as derived from the characteristics the individual ascribes to the large-scale social groups he identifies with, for example based on gender, race or occupation. According to Tajfel, there is a psychological need for

Citation: Karsten, Patricia (2008) Psychosocial Theory of Identity and Social Identity Theory: Outlining strengths and weaknesses of two different psychological approaches to identity, from <http://www.patriciakarsten.com>

belonging to a group of high status, because the individual derives self-esteem from it. In experimental studies, he explored the minimal conditions for group identification and coined the term 'minimal group'. Even if participants knew that they were randomly assigned to a group, they still showed significant preferential behaviour towards their ingroup and disfavoured the outgroup (Tajfel et al. and Billing and Tajfel as cited in Phoenix, 2007). In an ethically questionable exercise, American teacher Jane Elliot also illustrated minimal group effects. She divided school children according to eye-colour and observed strong insider/outsider behaviour against the group she disfavoured, as well as corresponding effects on the children's self-esteem (Phoenix 2007).

SIT has its strengths in the ability to explain why individuals use strategies of social mobility, social creativity and social change in order to increase their self-esteem through the status and power of the groups they belong to, and why there seems to be a human tendency to devalue other groups and disfavour their members. But the approach has also been criticized for the possible lack of ecological validity of its experimental findings. SIT might oversimplify complex social processes that lead to group identification by treating minimal groups based on arbitrary characteristics as equivalent to group identity based on characteristics with high influence on personal experiences like disability or skin colour (Henriques as cited in Phoenix, 2007). Furthermore, SIT does not address the issue of multiple, possibly conflicting group identities, for example when 'being black' leads to a different interpretation of identity than 'being a woman', a question important in Social Constructionist theories (Phoenix 2007).

So while Psychosocial Theory focuses on the personal aspects, and SIT addresses the more social aspects of identity, they can both be criticized for having a one-sided focus that fails to integrate these interdependent aspects of identity. Although neither of the theories addresses the importance of the physical body for the individual's sense of self, they can still contribute to explaining the effects of disability on identity, for example with respect to personal coping strategies or group identification (Phoenix 2007). In summary, despite their shortcomings, both approaches offer interesting insights into identity and its development and have made important contributions to understanding the factors that influence and shape the individual's sense of identity.

References

Phoenix, A. (2007). Identities and diversities. In D. Miell, A. Phoenix, and K. Thomas (Eds.), *Mapping Psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 43-95). Milton Keynes: The Open University