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# IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: New Issues, New Directions

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## ABSTRACT

The study of identity forms a critical cornerstone within modern sociological thought. Introduced by the works of Cooley and Mead, identity studies have evolved and grown central to current sociological discourse. Microsociological perspectives dominated work published through the 1970s. Sociologists focused primarily on the formation of the "me," exploring the ways in which interpersonal interactions mold an individual's sense of self. Recent literature constitutes an antithesis to such concerns. Many works refocus attention from the individual to the collective; others prioritize discourse over the systematic scrutiny of behavior; some researchers approach identity as a source of mobilization rather than a product of it; and the analysis of virtual identities now competes with research on identities established in the copresent world. This essay explores all such agenda as raised in key works published since 1980. I close with a look toward the future, suggesting trajectories aimed at synthesizing traditional and current concerns.

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of identity forms a critical cornerstone within modern sociological thought. Introduced by the works of Cooley and Mead, identity studies have evolved and grown central to current sociological discourse. Microsociological perspectives (social psychology, symbolic interactionism), perspectives focused primarily on the individual, dominated work published through the

1970s.<sup>1</sup> Sociologists focused primarily on the formation of the “me,” exploring the ways in which interpersonal interactions mold an individual’s sense of self. But identity research of the past two decades proves antithetical to traditional concerns, a shift largely fueled by three important trends.

1. Social and nationalist movements of the past three decades have shifted scholarly attention to issues of group agency and political action. As a result, identity studies have been relocated to the site of the collective, with gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class forming the “holy trinity” of the discursive field (Appiah & Gates 1995:1). Writings attend, in particular, to that which constitutes a collective and the political implications that result from collective definitions.
2. Intellectual concerns with agency and self-direction have re-energized the study of identification processes. At the level of the collective, scholars are examining the mechanics by which distinctions are created, maintained, and changed.
3. New communication technologies have freed interaction from the requirements of physical copresence; these technologies have expanded the array of generalized others contributing to the construction of the self. Several research foci emerge from this development: the substance of “I,” “me,” and the generalized other in a milieu void of place, the establishment of “communities of the mind,” and the negotiation of copresent and cyberspace identities.

This essay explores each of these research agenda. Because of the literature’s expanse, I limit discussion to key works published since 1980. My review includes several nonsociological works, a strategy demanded by the makeup of this field. (I revisit this issue in the conclusion.) The essay closes with a look toward the future, as I suggest trajectories aimed at synthesizing traditional and current concerns.

## THE “NATURE” OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Collective identity is a concept grounded in classic sociological constructs: Durkheim’s “collective conscience,” Marx’s “class consciousness,” Weber’s *Verstehen*, and Tonnies’ *Gemeinschaft*. So rooted, the notion addresses the “we-ness” of a group, stressing the similarities or shared attributes around which group members coalesce. Early literature approached these attributes as “natural” or “essential” characteristics—qualities emerging from physiological traits, psychological predispositions, regional features, or the properties

<sup>1</sup>For recent directions in this literature, see Stryker (1992).

of structural locations. A collective's members were believed to internalize these qualities, suggesting a unified, singular social experience, a single canvas against which social actors constructed a sense of self.

Recent treatments of collective identity question the essentialism of collective attributes and images. Anti-essentialist inquiries promote the social construction of identity as a more viable basis of the collective self. Other works stress the problems inherent in collective categorization, presenting a postmodern challenge to arguments of unified group experiences.<sup>2</sup>

### *Social Constructionism: The Anti-Essentialist View*

In concert with theories of WI Thomas, Peter Berger, Erving Goffman, Howard Becker, and others, the social constructionist approach to identity rejects any category that sets forward essential or core features as the unique property of a collective's members. From this perspective, every collective becomes a social artifact—an entity molded, refabricated, and mobilized in accord with reigning cultural scripts and centers of power.

Social constructionism informs much of the work on gender identity. Such studies challenge essentialist dichotomies of gender and dismiss notions of gender's primordial roots. Constructionists conceptualize gender as an interactional accomplishment, an identity continually renegotiated via linguistic exchange and social performance. From this stance, researchers also explore subjective definitions of femininity and masculinity, attending to the symbols and norms that initiate and sustain either/or classifications (e.g. Bem 1993, Connell 1995, Coser 1986, C Epstein 1988, Fausto-Sterling 1985, Gailey 1987, Gerson & Peiss 1985, Hearn 1992, Kupers 1993, Margolis 1985, Marshall 1991, Probyn 1993, Richardson 1989, D Smith 1987, 1990, West & Zimmerman 1987, Wittenstrom 1995, Wittig 1981, 1986). Constructionist works often scrutinize agents of socialization, delineating their role in gender identity acquisition: the family (e.g. Caldera et al 1989, MacDonald & Parke 1986, Ross & Taylor 1989, Whiting & Edwards 1988), the schools (e.g. Best 1983, Cookson & Persell 1985, AJ Davis 1984, Eder 1995, Gilligan 1990, Hyde & Linn 1988, Hyde et al 1990, Raissiguier 1994, Sadker & Sadker 1994, Thorne 1995, Trepanier & Romatowski 1985), popular culture and media (e.g. Atkin 1982, Eilberg-Schwartz & Doniger 1995, Gaines 1991, Kalisch & Kalisch 1984, Kaplan 1983, CL Miller 1987, Sidel 1991, Signorielli 1990, Signorielli & Morgan 1988). While such studies reflect numerous intellectual traditions, all are concerned with the ways in which socialization agents organize and project the affective, cognitive, and behavioral data individuals use to form a gendered self.

An important outgrowth of gender constructionism rests with works that problematize the gender-sex link. Researchers dissect the differences in male

<sup>2</sup>I employ these broad labels for ease of presentation and fully acknowledge the variety of perspectives subsumed in each category.

and female biology—the body and reproductive system in particular. By questioning the meaning of biological distinctions, scholars expose the social rituals, symbols, and practices that transform such differences into social facts. In so doing, this literature demonstrates the inscription of gender on the body, simultaneously dismantling notions of gender as emergent from the body (e.g. Acker 1989, Arditi et al 1985, Bartky 1988, Bordo 1993, Corea 1985, Martin 1987, Medicine 1983, Nanda 1990, Oakley 1984, Papanek 1990, Sault 1994, Shilling 1993, Spallone & Steinberg 1987, Stacey & Thorne 1985). In highlighting the subjective nature of gender, constructionists do not deemphasize the effects of gender categories. Rather, they argue that socially defined maleness and femaleness severely constrict human behavior. Subjective definitions imprison individuals in spheres of prescribed action and expectation. Dorothy Smith writes of this effect within scholarship, dubbing it “the alienation of utterance . . . models of speaking, writing, and thinking that took (women’s) powers of expression away from us even as we used them” (1990:199–201). Gender scripting attitudes, behaviors, emotions, and language, and treating these scripts as natural signals, ensures that social members both succumb to and recreate the “armor” of gender identity stereotypes.

Constructionist approaches to sexual identity complement the gender literature. Important entries include the work of Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992) on lesbian identity and lesbian social movements. Taylor & Whittier map a three-step process, itemizing (a) the construction of boundaries that both insulate and differentiate nonmainstream groups from the dominant sexual collective, (b) the emergence of shared consciousness and goals among nonmainstream sexual groups, and (c) processes of politicization that valorize a group’s minority status. Janice Irving (1994) takes a similar approach to adolescent sexual identity. Irvine identifies nine “axes of constructed domains” (p. 11) that contribute to identity building and identity-based experience: gender relations, sexual identities, reproductive strategies and behavior, sexual language and public discourse, the role of the family, nonreproductive sexuality, the purpose of sex and the role of pleasure, knowledge and meaning of the body, and sexual violence. Irving also explores the cultural differences that can color sexual identification as it occurs in varying social locations. These works exemplify a much broader literature exploring the origins, meaning, and renegotiation of sexual communities (e.g. D’Emilio 1983, Faderman 1981, Faraday 1981, Plummer 1981, Raymond 1994, E Stein 1992b, Troiden 1988, Whatley 1994).

Race and ethnic studies represent another stronghold of constructionism. F. James Davis (1991), for example, provides a fascinating historical excursion that charts definitions of blackness in America. Davis documents the history of the “one drop rule,” a vehicle for racial classification. He unpacks the rule’s development and highlights its triumph over competing alternatives. Davis

follows the one drop rule in action, itemizing its role in the struggle to maintain the slave system. He also contrasts the US classification experience with racial categorization in other nations. Davis concludes with thoughtful speculation regarding the one drop rule's impact on the future of US race relations—particularly in light of developing demographic shifts. In another arena, Balibar & Wallerstein (1991) view racial identity within a broad analytical landscape, considering race in conjunction with nation and class. Blending constructionist premises with the socioeconomic lenses for which the authors are renowned, Balibar & Wallerstein thoughtfully analyze both imposed racialization and self-racialization, variably considering racial identity and collective repression, the struggle for collective autonomy, and the search for collective shelter.

Several works on racial and ethnic identity incorporate the subject's voice into their inquiries. Examples include Richard Alba's (1990) work on European-descended Americans. In keeping with constructionist premises, Alba argues that ethnic identity is no longer anchored in strongly ethnic social structures. Rather, he presents ethnicity as a symbolic entity "concerned with the symbols of ethnic cultures rather than with the cultures themselves" (1990:306). Alba argues that symbolic ethnicities are easily reshaped in response to varying situational contexts and growing social needs. His data suggest one such reconstruction—a renegotiation that unites European descendents under the broad umbrella of a European-American identity. Alba argues that this identity shift bears significant social benefits for those it encompasses; the shift provides white-Euro descendents with a larger, more comfortable base as they face a rapid influx of non-Euro, nonwhite immigrants.

Identity shifts and their implications are also central to Mary Waters's (1990) research. Like Alba, Waters brings forward a constructed, symbolic ethnicity. However, her work problematizes the relentlessness with which individuals cling to ethnicity. Waters scrutinizes ethnic identification in light of its social payoff—rewards, she argues, that prove negligible for white, Euro-descendents and potentially negative for Americans of nonwhite, non-Euro lineage. Ultimately, Waters comes to understand ethnic identity as the product of personal choice—a social category individuals actively decide to adopt or stress. Her research documents the ways in which those of mixed ancestry switch and amend their primary ethnic affiliations. In this way, Waters locates the attraction of ethnicity within a double-edged American value. Commitment to ethnic identity stems from a culturally based need for community—community lacking individual cost.

In another arena, Joann Nagel (1995) examines ethnic identity shifts as a sociopolitical phenomenon. Using US Census figures (1960–1990), Nagel documents changing patterns of Native American identification. She explains identity shifts with reference to three sociopolitical factors: changing federal

Indian policy, increased American ethnic politics, and growing American Indian political activism. Nagel argues that these factors raised Native American ethnic consciousness, and she traces the ways in which policy and politics encouraged an ethnic renewal. (Also see Blakely 1993, Conzen et al 1992, DeVos 1992, Dyson 1993, Farley 1991, Frankenberg 1993, Hout & Goldstein 1994, Ignatiev 1995, Jewell 1993, Shively 1992, Smedley 1993, Wade 1993, Williams 1990.)

Social constructionism drives a multifaceted literature on national identity. A rich collection of sociohistorical works on commemoration, narrative, and symbolization chart the ways in which actors, particularly elites, create, manipulate, or dismantle the identities of nations, citizenships, allies, and enemies (e.g. Agulhon 1981, Beaune 1991, Berezin 1997, Brubaker 1992, Corse 1996, Fine 1996, Gillis 1994, Griswold 1992, Hobsbaum 1992, Hobsbaum & Ranger 1983, Kubik 1994, Lane 1981, Schudson 1992, Schwartz 1987, 1991, Spillman 1997, Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz 1991, Y Zerubavel 1995). In related work, several studies grapple with constructionist issues as they consider the constitution of the American self (e.g. Bellah et al 1985, 1991, Hewitt 1989, Meyer 1987). One also finds innovative elaborations of constructionism, such as Benedict Anderson's (1991) work on imagined community. Anderson approaches national identity as a sociocognitive construct—one both spatially and temporally inclusive, both enabled and shaped by broader social forces. He documents key moments of identity construction, times during which cultural (language) and social factors (capitalism, print technology) convene in a particular historical moment, effectively remaking collective images of the national self (also see Bloom 1990).

Yet, more than any arena before the identity scholar's eye, national identity work presents a multivoiced excursion. Works probing nationalism with reference to the state and world markets continue to thrive (e.g. Armstrong 1982, Gellner 1983, Giddens 1984, Tilly 1990). "New institutionalism" brings middle-range questions to bear, examining political structures and organizational principles and their influence on policy, political agenda, and ultimately collective self-definition (e.g. Birnbaum 1988, Boli 1987, 1989, Jepperson & Meyer 1991, Skocpol 1985). Newer trends include Yasemin Soysal's (1994) "postnational model," which addresses changing definitions of national membership. Soysal examines the different strategies by which Western European nations incorporate guestworkers into the national citizenry. She argues that citizen collectives increasingly are defined not by their primordial ties to a territory, but according to entitlements emerging from both a transnational discourse and a set of structures celebrating human rights (also see Shapiro & Alker 1995).

Anthony D Smith (1991) poses perhaps the greatest challenge to constructionism. Smith adopts a middle-ground approach to national identity, linking social constructionism to more essentialist views. He defines national identity as a product of both "natural" continuity and conscious manipulation. Natural



continuity emerges from pre-existing ethnic identity and community; conscious manipulation is achieved via commemoration, ideology, and symbolism. Smith compliments this duality with a social psychological dimension, citing a “need for community” as integral to identity work. In Smith’s view, this tri-part combination distinguishes national identity, making it the most fundamental and inclusive of collective identities. (Complimentary positions include Connor 1990, Greenfield 1992, Hutchinson 1987. Calhoun 1993 and Hutchinson & Smith 1994 offer extensive literature reviews.)

### *Postmodernism: Deconstructing Categories*

While supporting the antiessentialism that drives constructionist inquiries on identity, postmodernists cite serious flaws in the school’s approach. Some find constructionism’s agenda insufficient, suggesting that it simply catalogues the identity construction process. Further, many contend that the constructionist approach implies identity categories built through interactive effort. Such a stance underemphasizes the role of power in the classification process (e.g. Connell 1987, Gilman 1985), mistakenly suggesting “a multidirectional flow of influence and agency” (Calhoun 1995:199). These weaknesses leave postmodern identity theorists skeptical of social constructionism’s trajectory, fearing that the paradigm ultimately approximates the very essentialism it fights against. Diane Fuss elaborates in evaluating the constructionist approach to gender: “specifying more precisely these subcategories of ‘woman’ does not necessarily preclude essentialism. ‘French bourgeois woman’ or ‘Anglo-American lesbian,’ while crucially emphasizing in their very specificity that ‘woman’ is by no means a monolithic category, nonetheless reinscribe an essentialist logic at the very level of historicism” (Fuss 1989:20).

In an effort to broaden the social constructionist agenda, postmodernists examine the “real, present day political and other reasons why essentialist identities continue to be invoked and often deeply felt” (Calhoun 1995:199). Further, in the study of identity, they view the variation within identity categories—i.e. women, African-Americans, working class—as important as the variation between identity categories. Finally, postmodernists advocate a shift in analytic focus, deemphasizing observation and deduction and elevating concerns with public discourse. In the spirit of Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, the postmodern-identity scholar deconstructs established identity categories and their accompanying rhetoric in an effort to explore the full range of “being.” Works in this tradition call into question models that equate discourse with truth; they expose the ways in which discourse objectified as truth both forms and sustains collective definitions, social arrangements, and hierarchies of power.

For students of identity, postmodern works on gender and sexuality prove richest. Judith Butler (1990), Patricia Hill Collins (1991), Jane Flax (1990),



Marjorie Garber (1992), Donna Haraway (1991), bell hooks (1984), and Trinh T Minh-Ha (1989) reconsider gender identity, giving voice to women of color, those of various social classes, and lesbian and bisexual women. They expose the dangers in approaching gender collectives as homogeneous entities and urge careful consideration of the complex, often contradictory, nature of collective existence. In contrast to the social constructionist, postmodern gender theorists challenge the dualistic, oppositional nature by which gender is traditionally framed. Patricia Hill Collins (1991), for example, notes that elements such as race and social class produce multiple variations of “women” and “men,” distinctions that many societies use to build complex hierarchical stratification systems. The existence of these multiple categories alerts us to the flaws of binary gender conceptualizations, focusing us instead on the ways in which multiple identity affiliations qualitatively change the nature of human experience (see also Agger 1993, Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill 1994, Fraser 1989, Leps 1992, Nicholson 1990, Nicholson & Seidman 1995, Raissiguier 1994, Riley 1988).

Core postmodern works on sexual identity follow a similar thrust, problematizing sexual categories and contesting sexual hierarchies (Butler 1993, Connell 1987, Sedgwick 1990, Seidman 1992). In contrast to prior treatments of sexual identity (i.e. studies exploring the construction of a particular sexual identity or community—e.g. homosexual, lesbian, etc), current “queer theories” advocate an inclusive approach. They suggest, first, simultaneous considerations of heterosexual and homosexual identity construction, and second, serious focus on identities excluded by the hetero/homo duality—e.g. bisexual or transgender identities (also see De Lauretis 1984, S. Epstein 1992, Stein 1992, Warner 1991). These basic tenets carry a provocative methodology. Queer theorists advocate a new “reading” of materials using an “inside/outside” opposition. In such an analysis, the reader must assume the connotation of homosexuality in the denotation of heterosexuality; the reader must reinterpret a product in terms of a homosexual presence. Further, the explication of a cultural product’s hetero/homo opposition must direct readers to all excluded forms of sexuality as well. Any work under analysis must be read with an eye for that which it itemizes and thus simultaneously implies. When queer theorists read television sitcom *Laverne and Shirley* (Doty 1993) or Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Rope* (DA Miller 1991) from a homosexual “subject-position,” they contest current hierarchical structures of sexuality. Constructing alternative readings of a work’s sexual implications deconstructs the taken-for-grantedness of the dominant sexual model. Reminiscent of Garfinkel’s approach to identifying “invisible” normative structures, queer theory’s subject-positioned readings jolt the very process of classification. (Agger 1991 and Fuchs & Ward 1994 offer recent, comprehensive reviews of postmodernism.)

Despite their differences, the issues raised by social constructionists and post-modernists alike direct scholarly attention to a collective's struggle to self-name, self-characterize, and claim social prerogative. Such concerns underscore the politics of identity.

### *Identity Politics and Collective Mobilization*

Collective identity and the political movements it spurs constitute an important concern for identity scholars. Issues of politics are raised in previously cited works on gender/sexuality and race. Identity politics also provides the focus for many works on the formation and experiencing of social class (e.g. Blumin 1989, Burawoy 1985, Carter 1985, Davidoff & Hall 1987, Dudley 1994, Eichar 1989, Farrell 1993, Form 1985, 1995, Gallie 1983, Gans 1995, Garcia 1991, Halle 1984, 1993, Katz 1993, Katznelson & Weir 1985, Katznelson & Zolberg 1986, McNall et al 1991, Vanneman & Cannon 1987, Wright 1989). However, concerns with identity politics move scholars beyond this "holy trinity" of the discursive field. Animal protectionists, environmentalists, the health conscious, the homeless, members of the 1960s student counterculture—in current literature, these groups too exemplify collectives moved by issues of collective definition, signification, and power.

When moved by identity, collectives take on distinct properties. Spurred not by ideology or resource mobilization, identity-based movements act rather than react; they fight to expand freedom, not to achieve it; they mobilize for choice rather than emancipation. Alberto Melucci, central in this area, notes:

The freedom to have which characterized . . . industrial society has been replaced by the freedom to be. The right to property has been, and remains, the basis of both industrial capitalism and its competitor model, 'real socialism'. In post-material society, there emerges a further type of right, the right to existence, or rather, to a more meaningful existence (1989:177–78; also see Calhoun 1991a:51, Giddens 1991:207–17).

In this way, identity politics creates "new social movements," collective initiatives that are self-reflexive and sharply focused on the expressive actions of collective members (Melucci 1989:60, 1997).

Identity politics and new social movements suggest a special form of agency—a self-conscious "collective agency." Identities emerge and movements ensue because collectives consciously coordinate action; group members consciously develop offenses and defenses, consciously insulate, differentiate, and mark, cooperate and compete, persuade and coerce. In such a context, agency encompasses more than the control and transformation of one's social environment. Rather, borrowing from Charles Taylor's discussion of agency and the self (1985:287), I suggest that collective agency includes a conscious sense of group as agent. Further, collective agency is enacted in a moral space. A

collective pursues the freedom to be because that which frames the collective's identity defines their existence as right and good (Taylor 1989).

In connection with issues of identity politics and collective agency, David Snow, Robert Benford, William Gamson, Doug McAdam, and others address the framing and schematization of identity as it occurs within social movements. Studies in this area delineate the frame alignment processes that bring both group focus and shared identity to particular collectives at specific historical moments. Further, these works itemize the ways in which resulting collective identities then direct movement participants by defining the parameters and appropriate arenas of collective action. Such analyses remain fully mindful of the ways in which movement participants' perceptions of history, social structures, and cultural arrangements constrain or enhance the interpretive processes. This work's appeal rests in its multifaceted theoretical base. By merging sociocognitive construction processes with concerns for structural and organization factors, this literature creates an exciting conceptual bridge, linking micro and macro analyses, linking cultural and social concerns. Such works provide a model that forces the simultaneous consideration of thought, articulation, and action (see e.g. Benford 1993, Benford & Hunt 1992, Cohen 1985, Fantasia 1988, Gamson 1992, Gamson et al 1982, Gerhards & Rucht 1992, Hunt et al 1994, Jasper & Nelkin 1992, Johnston 1991, Johnston et al 1994, Larana et al 1994, Lichterman 1996, McAdam 1982, 1988, 1994, Morris & Mueller 1992, Snow et al 1986, Snow & Benford 1992, Tarrow 1992, Taylor & Whittier 1992).

Recent literature raises concerns regarding the long-term social consequences of identity politics. Michael J Piore (1995), for example, writes of identity-based movements as isolated, cohesive "communities of meaning." Because such groups are narrowly focused and formed relative to distinctions, Piore argues that they find themselves incapable of cross-boundary exchange. Further, he believes such groups often remain unaware of the economic conditions that may constrain their collective goals. Based on these observations, Piore locates identity movements in America's ideological roots of individualism. He suggests that current socioeconomic conditions beckon a change in this stance. Using cognitive theories derived from sociology and anthropology, Piore presents a five-step plan aimed at replacing identity politics with a shared commitment to a unified national structure.

## IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES

Attention to collectives and the establishment of their identities has re-energized scholarly interests in the identification process itself. A growing literature explores the mechanics by which collectives create distinctions, establish

hierarchies, and renegotiate rules of inclusion. Such works are closely linked to important knowledge theories, including Bourdieu's theories of distinction, Derrida's focus on difference, Foucault's genealogy of epistomes, the semiotic models of Saussure and Pierce, and Zerubavel's work on sociomental classification. This section elaborates on a variety of identification processes currently under study.

Michele Lamont (1992) documents the role of *symbolic boundaries* in the construction of valued identities. Using rich data drawn from interviews with upper-middleclass men in France and the United States, Lamont specifies the conditions under which moral, socioeconomic, and cultural boundaries successfully create objective conditions of socioeconomic inequality. In contrast to Bourdieu, Lamont maintains a tri-part focus, demonstrating that the importance of boundary types varies across space and time. Her work also emphasizes boundary strength; her findings indicate that only those boundaries firmly grounded in widely shared meaning prove sufficiently strong to generate hierarchy and confer relative value to collective identities (Lamont 1995, 1997; also see Cohen 1986, Lamont & Fournier 1992, Sahlins 1989). In related work, Jill Quadagno & Catherine Forbes (1995) use cultural and social lenses to explore identification and distinction among US Job Corps participants. The authors examine the workings of both symbolic boundaries and structural barriers as these factors contribute to gender reproduction and gender inequality. Concerns with symbolic boundaries characterize recent inquiries in life course research as well. Works by Gaines (1991), Jeffreys (1989), Modell (1989), Postman (1982), Waksler (1991), Winn (1983), and Zelizer (1985) help to refocus sociologists on the cultural contexts within which age categories are constructed, age identities are built, and age transitions occur.

Margaret Somers (1994) and Harrison White (1992) approach issues of identification by specifying the *cultural repertoires* or systems of meaning that characterize various symbolic communities. These authors are especially concerned with the ways in which social context and social location enable the invoking of such repertoires. In this regard, Paul DiMaggio's (1982, 1987, 1992) landmark research on the arts also proves important. DiMaggio demonstrates the ways in which art acquisition and classification solidify status categories and distinguish the elite from the ordinary.

In a different arena, Jane Bachnik & Charles Quinn (1994) focus on *indexicality* and its role in the construction of Japanese identity. Building on the Japanese concepts "uchi" (inside) and "soto" (outside), various authors explore the ways in which these boundary distinctions direct collective orientation and pattern behavior. In probing identity, all authors consider both linguistic communication and social practice through their linkage to context. Elsewhere, Eviatar Zerubavel (1997a) offers a special edition that brings his concepts of

*lumping and splitting* to life. Authors chart these complementary sociomental processes as they explore identification and distinction in monetary exchange, fetal classification, the construction of sexual identities, and other interesting areas (also see E Zerubavel 1991, 1997b). Among social psychologists, John C Turner presents *depersonalization* as a process enabling collective identities. His work maps the ways in which depersonalization permits social stereotyping, group cohesiveness, ethnocentrism, cooperation and altruism, emotional contagion and empathy, collective action, and other processes (Turner et al 1987, 1994). Finally, James Aho (1994) invokes Berger & Luckman's five steps of *reification* to elaborate both the construction and deconstruction of political enemies. Aho situates his analysis in a variety of recent incidents, including the Ruby Ridge affair, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and a case study of a KKK defection. Using media reports, government documents, and interviews, Aho carefully explores the development of collective moral righteousness. He notes the processes by which such sentiments legitimate the destruction of the "other." Grappling with the question "Can one struggle effectively against evil without become tainted by it?", Aho builds an interesting case for an enemy that is both "them" and "us."

The study of objects also proves key to recent research on identification. Several works note the ways in which individuals and groups use art objects (Martorella 1989), commodities and commodity signs (Appadurai 1986, Goldman 1992, Hennion & Meadel 1993, O'Barr 1994), or clothing (Rubenstein 1995) to articulate and project identities. Complimenting this agenda, Dauber's (1992) work on Pueblo pottery, Mukerji's (1994, 1997) studies of formal French gardens, and Zukin's (1991) exploration of city structures use objects to better understand the political, cultural, social, and economic contexts in which the objects are produced. Finally, Nippert-Eng (1996) and Silver (1996) offer especially interesting excursions on the role of personal possessions in bridging identity transitions.

Several works, anchored in the study of discourse and symbolization, provide a multitiered analysis of collective identification and the ideologies that support it. In contrast to deterministic theories, such studies approach identification as a process that unfolds in relation to economic, historical, and political contexts. As such, multitiered investigations view identification at critical junctures in a collective's history, including periods of identity production, its institutionalization, and periods of identity interpretation. Further, these works cast identity discourse and symbols as mediators of structure and action. Robert Wuthnow's (1989) work on communities of discourse exemplifies the approach. Wuthnow explores the general cultural, political, and economic conditions that enabled three specific ideologies: the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and Marxist socialism. After charting the historical sources of

these agendas, Wuthnow traces the modes by which each ideology was institutionalized, taking readers through the schools, religious and scientific groups, and the governments and media that modeled and disseminated each perspective. Finally, Wuthnow examines audience reception and reaction, analyzing the collective application and experience of the three ideologies through the decades. Wuthnow's rich inquiry demonstrates the complex chain by which movement ideologies and resulting identities are both born and sustained.

Following Wuthnow's example, Valentine Moghadam (1994) adopts the multitiered approach, analyzing fundamentalist discourse and its relationship to gender and national identities. Other multitiered works include Michele Dillon's (1993, 1996) studies of discourse on divorce and abortion. Her works explore the ways in which political climate and the institutional status of discourse producers relates to both the nature and the effect of discursive strategies. In a similar vein, David Campbell (1992) examines the American "discourse of danger," exploring the ways in which such a discourse shapes visions of the American "us," the enemy "them," and ultimately, the form of American foreign policy. Cerulo (1995), too, applies a multitiered perspective in her study of national identity symbolization. Probing the various contexts of anthem and flag adoption, she identifies a set of social structural variables that appear to delimit general rules of symbolic expression. Cerulo also explores the institutionalization of identity symbols, suggesting a new theoretical model for predicting symbol change. Finally, her inquiries on symbol reception and interpretation elucidate faulty identity symbolization, thus specifying the conditions under which symbols can fail to capture the fervency of those they portray.

## TECHNOLOGY AND IDENTITY

In the present environment, one cannot consider identity without reference to new communication technologies (NCTs). NCTs have changed the backdrop against which identity is constructed; they have reframed the generalized others and the "generalized elsewheres" (Meyrowitz 1989) from which the self takes its cues.

Joshua Meyrowitz (1985, 1989, 1997) was among the first to fully explore the NCT/identity link. His works examine the ways in which electronic media reorganize the sites of social interaction. According to Meyrowitz, NCTs weaken or sever the connections between physical and social "place." In this way, NCTs locate the self in new hybrid arenas of action; they mesh public and private, beckon new types of performances, and form new collective configurations:

Television has fostered the rise of hundreds of "minorities"—people who in perceiving a wider world, begin to see themselves as unfairly isolated in some pocket of it. Television has empowered the disabled and the disenfranchised by giving them access to social information



in spite of their physical isolation. Television has given women an outside view of their incarceration in the home. Television has weakened visible authorities by destroying the distance and mystery that once enhanced their aura and prestige. And television has been able to do this without requiring the disabled to leave their wheelchairs, without asking the housewife to stop cooking dinner, and without demanding that the average citizen leave his or her easy chair (1986:309).

According to Meyrowitz, the places enabled by NCTs reconfigure the boundaries that distinguish collectives. Thus at the present social moment, the differences dividing children from adults may be less stark than those that distinguish the computer literate from the nonliterate. The line that separates home from work may now pale in comparison to online/offline borders.

David Altheide (1995) poses complementary positions in his work on NCTs and the self. He argues that NCTs enable new communication formats—new modes of selecting, organizing, and presenting information. In turn, these new formats reshape social activity; they modify or dismantle current practices, and spur or shape new ones. In this way, NCTs create new environments for self-development and identification; they present new opportunities for collective affiliation and mobilization. Altheide's writings on keyboard technology illustrate these ideas. In considering human experience with telephones, ATMs, computers, video games, calculators, and television controls, the author casts the keyboard as a new door to interaction. He argues that keyboard technology initiates a large majority of modern exchange. But while keyboards may transport us to places not easily accessed in the past, Altheide argues that the technology limits and directs the form and substance of the social interaction it enables. For example, keyboard technology reduces the distance between children and adults, often promoting a type of reverse socialization. Similarly, keyboard technology homogenizes work and play sites; keyboards merge adult work and play worlds, link adult workspaces and children's play spaces, and reconfigure children's play via the world of adult tools (1995: chaps. 2, 3). Beyond specific communication tools, Altheide also explores the intersection of communication, power, and social control. He considers the ways in which technology and its resulting communication formats provide some with the power to define a social situation while leaving others vulnerable to the reality of crafted images. In these and similar discussions, Altheide outlines the ways in which communication formats can "block" the social stage, scripting emergent action even in realms thought to possess an internal logic.

In the spirit of Meyrowitz and Altheide, many explore the impact of NCTs on community formation and resulting collective identity. Beniger (1987) initiated this agenda, suggesting specific ways in which media-generated communities provide a "pseudo-gemeinschaft" experience. Subsequent works describe technologically generated communities as more tangible and real. Several authors document the processes by which NCT's build "we-ness," demonstrating the



concrete effects of techno-links and charting emergent cultures of reference that can unify once disparate social actors (Cerulo et al 1992, Cerulo & Ruane 1997, Dayan 1992, Liebes 1990, Purcell 1997, Steuer 1992, Tichi 1991). But others are less enthusiastic regarding the impact of NCTs on community and identity. Schlesinger (1993), for example, notes both the potential and the surprising failure of electronic media in constructing a unified European identity among the nations that comprise the Euro-community (also see Morley & Robins 1995). Similarly, Fisher's (1992) sociohistorical research on the telephone suggests that community structure can be remarkably resilient to technological change. Overall, Fisher (1997) remains skeptical of NCT's ability to reconfigure social bonds (also see Postman 1992). These contradictory positions have led some to initiate multidimensional models, models designed to address and distinguish varying forms of NCT-generated bonds (see Calhoun 1991b, Cerulo 1997).

Related works magnify identification processes within specific NCT domains. Sherry Turkle (1995), for example, explores online communities and their impact on personal identity construction. She follows members of a virtual community as they interact in "multi-user domains" (MUDS). Testimony of MUD members, along with Turkle's keen insights, provide a unique picture detailing the building and experiencing of online persona. Further, Turkle documents the ways in which individuals negotiate online identities relative to other facets of the self. By probing the balance between "virtual" selves and "real" selves, Turkle's work forces us to question any perspective that places virtual experience second to the concrete. In another arena, Byron Reeves & Clifford Nass (1996) approach communication media as objects relevant to identity-building interactions. In essence, the authors find that media objects become a viable "other" in the building of self, and they outline the ways in which human-to-machine relationships mirror purely human relationships. Reeves & Nass discover, for instance, that people treat computers with female voices differently than those with male voices; people are polite to computers even though they don't need to be; the size and movement of TV screen images affects physical responses and perceptions of personal bodyspace in ways identical to real-life motion. These patterns hold implications for identity studies and beyond. Indeed, relevant to communication efficacy, the authors suggest that the human brain has not sufficiently evolved relative to technology's rapid advancement. Reeves & Nass suggest ways in which this knowledge can improve future technological products.

## CONCLUSION

The literature here reviewed constitutes an antithesis to traditional identity studies, an antithesis built upon several research fronts. The works cited here refocus

scholarly attentions from the individual to the collective. These works often prioritize discourse over the systematic scrutiny of behavior. Many studies approach identity as a source of mobilization rather than a product of it. Finally, the analysis of virtual identities now competes with research on identities established in the copresent world. In considering the old and the new of identity, one finds a field ripe for synthesis. This section suggests potential avenues for synthesis, noting works that exemplify such efforts. The works chosen here are not “ideal types,” but rather suggestive models—models that illustrate what can be gained when the future is mined from careful reflection on past and present.

Some have achieved a productive synthesis of identity work through the reconciliation of theory. In recent work on gender identity, for example, Judith Lorber (1994) synthesizes constructionist and postmodern concerns of the day with issues raised by sex role theorists and Marxist feminists of past decades. Her efforts result in an interesting theory that frames gender as a social institution—a free-standing entity that establishes patterns of expectations, orders social processes, and drives social organizations. In another arena, Norbert Wiley (1995) merges Peircian and Meadian paradigms to form a neo-pragmatist view of the self—the self as a three-dimensional dialogue between “I,” “you,” and “me.” Wiley then works with pragmatist notions of reflexivity and Durkheimian solidarity concepts to create a model of “a semiotic self,” a *sui generis* self resistant to social determination. In a historical era spurred by identity politics, Wiley argues that conceptions of a *sui generis* self may prove vital to the defense of democratic principles.

Others attend to macro-micro linkages in promoting the cause of synthesis.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, several recent theoretical advances relevant to identity studies rest on successful macro-micro linkages: Bourdieu’s work on habitus, Giddens’s structuration theory, or Habermas’s theories of communicative action. Further, a number of the works heretofore discussed have successfully established the links of which I speak. Research on social movements or several of the multitiered identity projects represent prime illustrations. Other macro-micro initiatives are underway. For example, determined to eradicate the micro-macro divide, Deidre Boden (1994) innovatively combines elements of each arena, thus building a unique analytic approach to organizational identity, form, and function. Boden maps conversational exchanges across varied organizational settings, using these data to configure the structure of talk in organizations. She then examines talk structures as vehicles that constitute organizations, analyzing organizations as they emerge within daily interaction. Boden argues that “the ways in which organizational actors realize both the

<sup>3</sup>Within sociology at large many advocate this path (Collins 1986, Huber 1991, Ritzer 1990), in particular, with reference to issues addressing the intersection of the social and the cultural (Schudson 1989, Sewell 1992, Swidler 1986).

constraints and opportunities in their working environments is critical to what actually constitutes an 'environment' " (p. 32). For Boden, the micro-processes of talk become the macro-structure of the organization. (Snow 1987 offers a similarly interesting project on talk and identity.) In another arena, Cerulo (1997b) pursues macro-micro linkages in analyzing narratives of violence. She explores the institutionalization of storytelling formats in this area and documents the impact such formats can have on audience evaluations of violent acts. In essence, her study elucidates the conditions under which macro-social norms of communication can direct complex micro-patterns of cognition and identification. Among social psychologists, Peggy Thoits & Lauren Virshup (1997) propose a macro-micro merger that hinges on social theories of the mind. Specifically, they suggest ways in which self-schema theory might unify inquiries on individual and collective identity.

In the cause of synthesis, scholars of collective identity also might revisit traditional micro-level studies in the area. Much common ground exists between traditional and new approaches to the topic. For example, I noted earlier that collective identity scholars are currently exploring the ways in which multiple identity affiliations qualitatively change the nature of human experience. During the 1980s, social psychologists' addressed similar themes, focusing on multiple roles, their resulting identities, and the impact of both on human experience (see e.g. Burke & Franzoi 1988, Stryker 1980, Thoits 1986). To be sure, collective and micro-level inquiries pursue different elements of "human experience." Yet, knowledge of the cognitive processes, social practices, and symbolic tools with which identity is constructed, enacted, and projected is integral to each school of thought. Knowing this, focused efforts to translate certain findings from the social psychological realm to the macro level could hold rich rewards for collective identity studies.

At the broadest level, an important site of synthesis rests in the careful blending of intellectual perspectives. Within the past two decades, the humanist or cultural studies approach to identity has dominated the field. To be sure, sociologists of identity cannot afford to ignore these works, for they provide a rich and thorough treatment of the symbols, rituals, and world views that constitute identity. At the same time, the sociologist must consider this literature with some care. At present, the cultural studies position appears somewhat trapped in a singular conclusion that locates the constructed nature of culture in the sole service of power. Further, such works frequently frame social action as a process that is fully culturally constituted. In tapping identity materials garnered from the cultural studies approach, sociologists must diligently maintain the critical analytic distinction between the social and the cultural (see Schudson 1997). Via careful consideration of actors, collectives, and broader social institutions, via thoughtful attention to lived experience and the

cultural products and rituals associated with such experience, the sociology of identity can fully elucidate the intricate links between the social and cultural domains.

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